FEBRUARY 1927

EVERYBODY'S

NUMBER 330

Everybody's

FEBRUARY 1927
25c

New Novels of PERIL *and* ADVENTURE

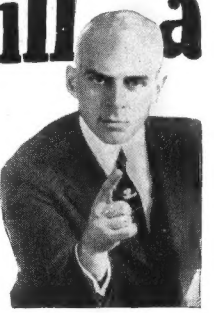
By BEATRICE GRIMSHAW

and CAPTAIN DINGLE

Electrical Experts are in Big Demand!

—L. L. Cooke

I Will Train You at Home to fill a Big-Pay Job!



L. L. COOKE
Chief Engineer

It's a shame for you to earn $15 or $20 or $30 a week, when in the same six days as an Electrical Expert you could make $70 to $200—and do it easier—not work half so hard. Why then remain in the small-pay game, in a line of work that offers no chance, no big promotion, no big income? Fit yourself for a real job in the great electrical industry. I'll show you how.

Look What These Cooke Trained Men are Earning

Makes $700 in 24 Days in Radio

"Thanks to your interesting Course I made over $700 in 24 days in Radio. Of course, this is a little above the average but I run from $10 to $40 clear profit every day; you can see what your training has don for me."
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Holyoke, Mass.

Be an Electrical Expert

Learn to Earn $3,500 to $10,000 a Year

Today even the ordinary Electrician—the "screw driver" kind—is making money—big money. But it's the trained man—the man who knows the whys and wherefores of Electricity—the Electrical Expert—who is picked out to "boss" the ordinary Electricians—to boss the Big Jobs—the jobs that pay $3,500 to $10,000 a Year. Get in line for one of these "Big Jobs." Start by enrolling now for my easily learned, quickly grasped, right-up-to-the-minute, Spare-Time Home-Study Course in Practical Electricity.

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Your Satisfaction Guaranteed

So sure am I that you can learn Electricity—so sure am I that after studying with me, you, too, can get into the "big money" class in Electrical work, that I will agree in writing to return every single penny paid me in tuition, if, when you have finished my Course, you are not satisfied it was the best investment you ever made. And back of me in my guarantee, stands the Chicago Engineering Works, Inc., a two million dollar institution.

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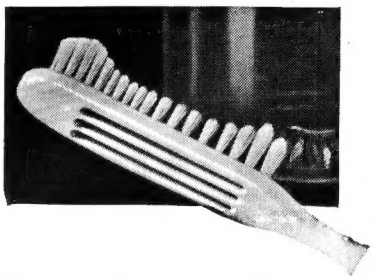
The "Cooke" Trained Man is the "Big Pay" Man



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The Pebeco Tooth Brush—*ventilated*—is never moist, weak—because it dries quickly. Its firm, "live" bristles clean between your teeth, stimulate your gums. And its *two tufts* reach every part of your teeth. All druggists. Made only by Pebeco, Inc. Bloomfield, N. J.

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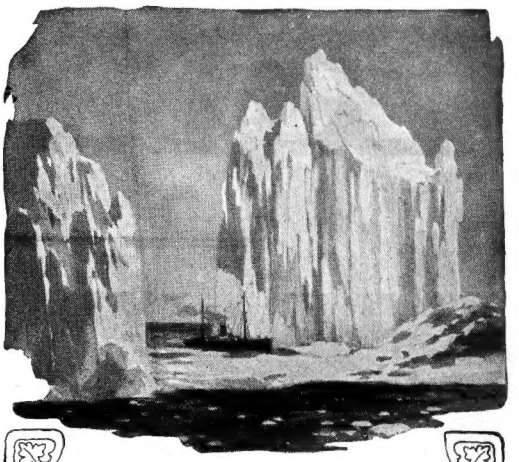

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B. W. COOKE, 1916 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 238, Chicago
Send me absolutely FREE and without any obligation on my part, 3 Lessons and 3 Job Tickets. Also your Auto Book FREE and full particulars of your 5 Outfits Offer.

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Don't delay a minute. Send coupon right now while I can still make you this special offer of 3 Lessons and 3 Job Tickets **absolutely free**—as well as my Big Auto Book, **free, too!** Act now!

B. W. COOKE Directing Engineer

Chicago Motor Training Corporation
1916 Sunnyside Ave. Dept. 238 CHICAGO, ILL.

February
1927

Everybody's

Volume LVI
No. 2

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The painting on the cover by A. L. Ripley

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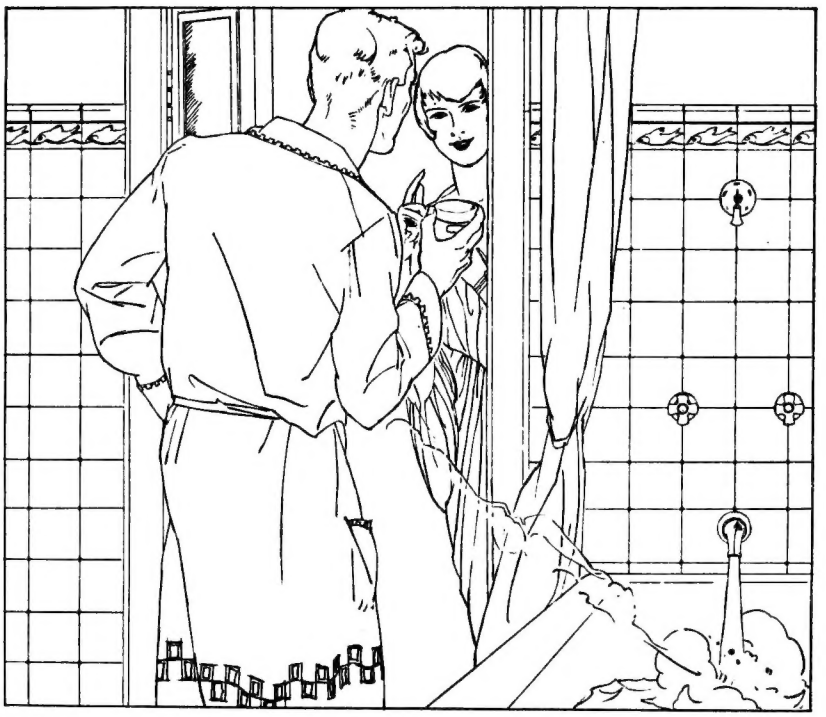
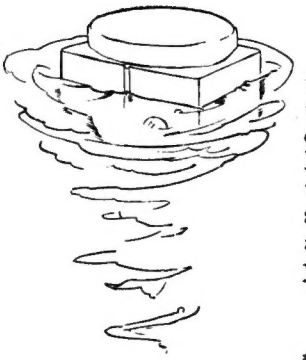


"You can't keep a good soap down!" *

THIS is a libelous portrait of a man of our acquaintance whose wife (gentle economist) tantalized him by the promise of Ivory for his bath—*as soon as he had used up his cake of sinker-soap!*

Unwilling to do further submarine searching for his leaden but elusive soap globule, yet loath to cross his smiling wife's wishes, our friend proceeded as follows:

1. Borrowed a cake of Ivory from his daughter.
2. Cemented sinker-soap to Ivory cake.
3. Placed the ill-mated pair in bath water, and proved Ivory a life-saver, as shown.



"It Floats"

At the present writing, the wedded soaps are wafer-thin—the sinker-soap from dissolution, the Ivory from lather-giving generosity; and thus one man has demonstrated the falsity of the adage that "you cannot eat your cake and have it, too."

PROCTER & GAMBLE

*In using this headline, we bow acknowledgment to hundreds of correspondents from coast to coast.

IVORY SOAP

99 44/100 % Pure

Luxury and economy are wedded in Guest Ivory—for wives who treasure their complexions. Guest Ivory costs only 5 cents because so many women won't use anything else.

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Advertising section continued in rear of book

A WANDERER *In Far Places*

A few words about Beatrice Grimshaw whose novel "*Black Sheep's Gold*" begins on the next page

THE "dark islands" of the Pacific retain the most primitive enchantment left on this over-inhabited earth of ours. It is through these dark islands that Beatrice Grimshaw wanders and on one of them, Papua, that she has her home and does her work.

She first went to these Pacific islands a number of years ago, commissioned by a London journal to write a series of articles about the South Seas. While she has returned to what we call civilization since then, she has never returned for long. The dark islands have claimed and held her.

Isn't it, in fact, rather a fascinating picture she paints of her home in New Guinea?

"Being Papua," she writes, "nobody fusses. I have some good friends among a delightful, naughty tribe—the Koiari, last survivors, in this part of the country, of the old wicked cannibals. The Koiaris are not cannibal now, though the elder folk have all tasted human flesh. 'Government' has got them, tamed them more or less. They hate civilization, and hide from it. They have very strong likes and dislikes; fifteen years ago, they marked their preference in blood. Now they use the more modern weapon of the boycott.

"One old gentleman, clad only in bird of paradise feathers, tells me how he used to spear people with whom he did not agree. Clearly he regrets the good old times. 'Your house,' he says 'was one of the big battle sites. We have had many a good fight here. I would like more tea and tobacco.'

"It is getting dusk; Roma, the giant waterfall is lifting her voice louder and louder; on the three hundred feet of white tossing water the moon begins to fall. The forest smells like spring narcissus. The Koiari are gone. I am alone.

"Is it good? Yes!"

1

Beginning

BLACK SHEEP'S

CHAPTER I

WILD SEA-HORSES

THE cigar was unwontedly good; it had made me peaceful and dreamy—that, or the reaction after the fuss of getting aboard and away. At all events, I leaned back in the cushioned smoke-room chair, and gave myself up to enjoyment; let the sounds and sights and the smells of the great liner flow pleasantly over me. A girl was singing a little, exquisite French song with a merry ripple in the notes; through panels of plate glass that gave on the music-room, one could see the sparkle of gilding, gloss of satins and brocades; in the smoke-room, where I sat, there was smell of tobacco and pleasant drinks, murmur of well bred voices; slap and rustle of cards, calls for the "boy." Up the companion, rising like an incense to the gods of modern shipping, came that immemorial, mixed ship smell that travelers know; chilled fruit in it, rubber carpeting in it, paint, soap, upholstery; last, not least to me, suggestion of good meals.

They were all there, the things that I had known and forgotten. And the beat, beat of the great steamer's heart, that was to carry on, day and night, until Hongkong; and the barely heard, long wash of the Coral Sea, as we ran north from Cairns in Queensland up towards Torres Straits, through all the sapphire and topaz glory of a tropic winter day.

Who is able to write the eclogue of those tropic winters, along Australia's and New Guinea's opposite coasts—the air like golden wine just breathed on by a hint of distant cold; the seas blue, blue beyond any epithet or comparison discoverable in books—light that makes all the lights of colder latitudes seem penny-farthing candles; light striking from above and below, and slaying all shadow with its crystal sword; so that a man dressed in white seems to walk in it almost invisible. Days, in midwinter of July and June, that hold a secret intoxicant, nameless, incredible to all who have not tasted it; something that keeps in its depths the very spring of life, hints at the existence of delights just over the edge of our poor five senses, some day, perhaps, to be explored by a wiser race. Love of the sun, craving for tropic glories, are not ignoble, not vain. Did not the race of man take birth in the sunlands? Our mother-house owes us somewhat, yet. Those who come after us will formulate that debt, collect it. We of today scarce know its existence; but we look, we finger, we hanker—and are reproved by the too wise. For it remains a truth, that worldly prosperity haunts the lands of winter dark.

GOLD

By BEATRICE GRIMSHAW

It cannot have been the cigar that sent all this skimming and balancing through my mind, as the last of the gulls of Cairns were skimming and balancing about the ship. Or yet the one good whisky I had had. I think it was the much stronger stimulant of one hundred and seventy-two solid pounds, mine since yesterday, and now in the care of the ship's majestic purser. There's nothing makes a man feel so innocently drunk as a hatful of cash, when he has been a long time short. This cash of mine was the result of a lucky win in a sweep on the English Derby; nothing more respectable than that—but the strictest purist could hardly have found fault with my way of spending it. I was down in Cairns upon business (very small business and cheap) when the windfall came; and wisely, I decided to go home at once, instead of waiting for the monthly B. P. boat. For, after all, I wasn't out of my twenties and Cairns is rather unnecessarily full of bars, also of little sly shops that are not what they pretend or ought to be; and money flies; and I didn't want mine to fly. One treat I must have, I decided; and the call of the *Catacara* suggested its kind. I would spend eight of my precious pounds on a two-day run to Thursday Island, and get back thence to New Guinea by cutter. For two days I would dream that I was back in the spacious days of home and riches; the years when my father owned a fine country house, and a smallish town house, and I had been going to be an English squire, some time or other, and life and society and the "right people," and what one was going to do with oneself after Harrow and the 'Varsity, had all been changeless, solid as fixed stars.

Nothing solider than that house, the long avenue with the firs and the crackling gravel, the cottages and farms that were ours, the garden and its strange old-fashioned roses—rice roses, Scotch yellow, moss roses, cabbage, "Glory-John," and its flowering currant that clambered over the palings, and made pungent scent strong through ten thousand miles and twenty years. Nothing more sure than the passing for ever and ever the same, of those slow summers and winters, in the north of England climate; pale suns and pretty, passionless flowers, rain and short days and snow. Everything set, unalterable.

IN ONE half hour it was swept away. My father fell dead of unsuspected heart trouble. The solid house, the firs and the avenue, the cottages and farms, Harrow, Cambridge, the "right people," the set, unalterable way of living, all went down the winds of the world together, swept by the same great hurricane. He had

speculated— He had hoped to set things right— Anyone can fill in the rest.

That was in '14. You know what followed. I was eighteen years of age, hearty and husky of build. There was only one thing to do; I did it. In '19, demobilized, aged twenty-three, I faced the world, with some scars and medals to my credit; also two crosses. Nothing much more.

I had been in Egypt; Mesopotamia. The sun lands had got me. I took up land in Australia; failed; went north and north; landed at last in Papua. I had a trading store at the wild west end of the country. I was some years older, a little wiser, a little tougher than even the war had left me. The wild lands had marked me for their own.

And, on that jeweled day of equatorial winter, I was on board the Eastern Liner *Catacara*, having my treat; with no thought of anything but a couple of days' enjoyment, under circumstances that had been mine, and were not; with no dream of anything fateful, anything significant, in the brief journey. I was merely going back to Daru by T. I. So I thought. What I did not know was that I was, on that day, running right into the double fate that was to change my life.

It began in the oddest manner conceivable. I had finished my cigar, looked at myself in the long mirror as I strolled out on deck, and decided that I would do—the new Assam suit didn't look very ready made; the tie and shoes were right, and the head above the tie—dark and smooth, with gray eyes rather too prominent and staring, a beaky young nose, and a mouth that knew how to shut up—was at least not unpresentable. I was in a peaceful mood; I liked to be where I was, and liked the look of the people about me, and I thought there was going to be a good lunch by and by, and a good dinner afterward. So that was that; and I found a chair, and dropped into it, wishing I knew how to purr like a cat; for I felt that way.

I was simply lifted out of the chair, before I had time to settle down, by shrieks from up forward, where there was a wide unoccupied space of deck. Girls' shrieks—at least three were in it; and they were screaming at the top of their voices. Feet were stamping on the deck, too; if anything was wrong, it seemed that rescuers were about. Of course I crammed down my hat on my head, as a man who has once hunted will instinctively do in emergency, and made for the space of foredeck, extremely ready to come to the aid of beauty in distress. I don't know what I expected; certainly it was not what I saw.

THAT morning there had been a fixture posted up beside the saloon companionway—a gymkhana item left over from the last sports meeting. "Sea-horse Race" was its name; it did not convey very much to me, but I judged it to be difficult; or unpopular, since there were but three entrants; each of them double—the name of a man, and a girl, I remembered, too, the look in the faces of three or four girls, who were reading the entries, and—one really cannot call it anything else—sniffing over them. They were singularly nice well bred looking flappers, too; one would not have suspected them of a sniff. These girls I recognized almost as soon as I came out on the foredeck; they were bunched together at one side, looking very hard at the other side, and the "sniff"—it was not quite a sneer—was more prominent than ever.

This, as I have said, I noticed almost at once. What first drew my attention was the sight of three ship's officers, attired in all their tropic glory of white drill and gold, cantering down the deck like horses. On the shoulders of each sat astride an extremely pretty girl, dressed in a bathing suit of the kind known as "one-piece." I think the bathing suits were silk or satin, or something of that kind; maybe chiffon is the name—at all events, they were very smart, and very bright in color. The girls had jockey caps on their heads, and they were flogging their mounts along with silk handkerchiefs, and screaming encouragement at the top of their rather high voices.

I saw all this in a moment; recognized it for the "Sea-horse Race," and guessed, without much difficulty, that the riders were three musical comedy actresses, going up to join a revue company touring the East, of whom I had heard when taking my passage. One of them—a tall, white-limbed lass with red bobbed hair—was apparently winning; her mount, the chief officer, was yards ahead of the rest. I saw that. I saw, too, the face of a girl on the opposite side of the deck; staring hard at the racers; she had a profile like an old Italian coin,

dark hair close shingled; and exceedingly blue eyes. That face held me for an instant; it was as if the owner had suddenly called.

Then I saw what made me leap across the deck, tear off my jacket, and fling myself over the rail of the *Catacara*, down thirty feet into the sea.

In the excitement of winning, the red-haired girl had let go her hold of the chief officer's forehead, waved her arms, and lost balance completely. They were near the rail; she began to topple, and I saw she was bound to go. I didn't wait for her to fall; I sprang first. I think we went through the air almost together; she struck the water about as soon as I, and we both went down, in a smother of foam and boiling blue.

"The screws!" was my thought, as I rose; and with that came a consoling recollection of the *Catacara's* age; she was no new boat; she hadn't twin screws. That, I think, saved us. We came up well in the rear; when I had grabbed the girl, and got the water and my own hair out of my eyes, I could see the steamer's immensely tall stern already hundreds of yards away, and leaving us as if nobody had seen us go overboard.

Of course they had; they were getting a boat out, and taking the way off the ship, as quickly as might be—but if ever you have been left in the midst of the inhospitable ocean by a liner running at full speed, you will realize that I had plenty of time to grasp the situation; plenty of time, too, to wonder if we weren't both likely to be drowned before help could reach us. Because the red-haired girl, in spite of her stage bathing costume, couldn't swim at all.

She was plucky; no one could have been pluckier. She gasped a good bit, but did not cling; she did as I told her, put her hands on my shoulders, and let her legs swing out to support her. "I—I can float—a bit," she said, chokingly. "I—I'm not a scrap afraid. Never say die; th—that's my motto."

IF SHE was not afraid, I was; abominably so. Because I had seen something she, with her face turned towards my back, had not seen; something I did not want her to see. A black, sharp finger, the finger of death, and ugly death, that beckoned to us both.

I didn't need to look at the *Catacara*—now motionless, a long way off—to know that the boat she had lowered stood no chance in that life-and-death race. I knew what a shark could do in the way of speed, when once it scented food. This shark was only cruising—so I thought—but if it made up its mind to attack us, twenty seconds would see the finish.

And the girl would talk; would try to show me that she wasn't frightened, would emit small giggles, piteously brave. "I bet the cats won't be sorry, if we croak," she said. "See them look at my friends and me? Been down on us all the voyage, they have. This'll be raspberry jam to them. I—is that boat getting any nearer?"

"Almost up," I lied. Something else was almost up. The shark was getting curious; zigzagging about; coming nearer with every tack. "Look here," I said suddenly, "are you game to do just what I tell you and ask no questions?"

"Aren't I! Try me."

"Then put your mouth down to the water, and blow as hard as you can."

She stared; was about to speak—but something in my face checked her. Awkwardly she bent her lips to the swaying green that barely held us up; struggling but determinedly blew. I blew also. Bubbles went streaming from our lips under water; a string of silver bells, a web of pearls. I blew, and watched, unceasingly, that black curved finger. One would have sworn that it had moved no nearer, yet somehow it was larger; more like the sail of a model yacht than a finger, now. I twisted round as much as I dared, and looked at the ship's boat. Gosh, but they were rowing! Would they be in time?

"Blow," I said savagely to the girl. "Blow more, or I'll drop you." I put my mouth down again, and blew till I almost choked. Years ago, in mid-Pacific, I had heard about this way of keeping off sharks; had even seen the girls who swam in the Prussian-blue pools of Nieué, blowing bubbles every now and then, just as a measure of precaution.

But was there really anything in it? Had any human creature, attacked, or in danger of attack, ever kept away these tigers of the deep by merely puffing bubbles at them? I didn't know. I only knew that there was nothing else to do.

I twisted round again, and now the fin was certainly bigger—but the shark was

leisurely in his movements, still. He zigzagged up and down like a boat beating against the breeze. I found it hard to estimate his distance; I only knew that every one of those long beats brought him a little nearer to the bright-colored moving mass he must long since have perceived—ourselves.

It was impossible to go on blowing forever. We halted, for a rest. By this time the girl had certainly guessed what was happening; but she said never a word. Her laughter, her silly bravado, had vanished; she held to my shoulder with a clutch of iron, and her breath came short as sobs, but she still kept her head; still refrained from grabbing or hampering me.

She didn't even ask questions. The sun beat terribly upon our heads; we floated unstably, almost overturning; our mouths were full of salt, and our hearts of deadly fear. I looked at the fin again. "God," I said, and didn't know I spoke, "it's coming," —for it had turned end on, and I saw it as a black spike sticking out of the water, incredibly huge.

I put my mouth down again, and blew—blew till my lungs were one hot pain all down my back. The black fin poised. I felt the girl's finger nails like claws in my neck; heard her spluttering uselessly into the water, game to the last; swung her round, I don't know how, so as to get my body between her and the sea-tiger that was hungering for our blood; saw it go off with a rush like a torpedo, and thought the end was come.

What I had forgotten about was the boat.

I don't think for a moment that our blowings and bubblings had any effect upon the shark, other than to excite its curiosity. It was the near approach of the ship's whaleboat, furiously rowed, that gave it pause. Pause, I say, because, when the boat had dashed between us and the shark, and four strong arms were busy hauling us up over the gunwale—a thing that can't be done in seconds, try how you may—the shark suddenly seemed to realize that its dinner was leaving it, and made such a determined charge that the sailors had to fight it off with all the available oars. I don't think that would have stopped it either, had not somebody had the forethought to bring an ax. With this, the chief officer hit the brute fair on the head, and sent it fathoms deep, spouting out more red blood through the blue of the water than anyone could believe who has not seen a shark killed.

THEY had got us into the boat by this time, and the chief had a tot of whisky ready. I never saw a man look more as if he wanted one himself, but that was small wonder; if he had not been playing the giddy goat, nothing would have happened. I think I told him as much; also, that I was not in the least cold, and would have a dry shift in ten minutes; didn't need a drink. The lady, I said, had better have one.

She and he shared it. Her face looked very white, under her wet red hair, and I dare say he may have thought she would take cold; anyhow, he put his uniform coat round her, and was making all fast with his arm when she wriggled apart from him, and flung herself down on the seat beside me.

"I'm going to sit next to the bravest man I ever met," she said, her breast heaving up and down very fast under the white and gold coat. I saw she was almost in hysterics, so I simply answered, "Rats. We fell over together." And nobody said anything more, till the whaleboat nosed against the ship's side.

When they got us on board, it was the very devil for five minutes. People came and shook my hand, and told me I was a brave man; some of them thumped my back; several wanted me to come and have a drink.

I answered plain truth, told them that there was nothing to make a fuss about; we fell together, and it was much worse for her than for anyone, since she couldn't swim; if they wanted to make songs about anyone, it might well be the lady.

"Oh, we all know Gin-Sling is game," said somebody, "but you're gamer." "We couldn't have done without Jinny," cut in someone else. "No, by Jove!"—"Jinny forever!"—"Gin-Sling's preserver!" "Hooray!"

They would have it; I was fairly mobbed. I could hardly get to my cabin for a change of clothes without being carried on the shoulders of the crowd. But that I was determined against; I slipped down a steward's companion, and got away.

The peace of my cabin, its cool glittering white walls and shining brasses, the silk coverlet and curtains; the subdued purring, outside, of the formidable sea, now so safely

mastered and shut away, came on me like a blessing. I dropped on the lounge; it was some time before I even thought of dragging off my sodden shoes, and shedding my wet clothing. I had not touched the chief officer's flask, or accepted the champagne that others had been anxious to uncork for me, but I was drunk mind and body, on one look that I had caught as I came slowly, drenched with weariness and wet, up the ship's ladder. A look from blue eyes below black shingled hair. A look that cast a girl's fair soul at my feet.

CHAPTER II

THE BREAKING OF THE DREAM

I AWOKE next morning with a name upon my lips; a name I had heard the night before. "Pia Laurier." It seemed to me—as it does still—the sweetest, daintiest girl's name in the world. I knew all about it, too, how Miss Pia Laurier, of the blue eyes and black shingle, had had an Italian grandmother; how the grandmother had bequeathed her a profile and a pretty fortune and a prettier name; how, in consequence, Miss Pia was of more importance in her family—one of the New South Wales squatter families—than elder brothers and sisters; how much her parents thought of her, and how very, very carefully they had brought her up. Miss Pia jazzed like the best of them; powdered her tiny classic nose and painted her beautiful lips (which, I was certain, needed no color but their own); smoked a cigaret now and then, and drank an occasional cocktail. But she did all these things with reserve. They were not Pia Laurier. They amounted, in sum, to a sort of protective mimicry, not uncommon among original and charming girls who feel, instinctively, that it is not well for a young maiden on her preference to be too "different." Pia, in thus making herself like her hard-shelled, predatory compeers, was sheltered by a toughness never hers; advertised (for girls-to-marry need publicity) by "A borrowed force, and a hardihood not her own."

Nevertheless she was—one felt it in one's bones—a very reincarnation of that gracious, titled dame from historic Verona, who had set her mark upon the Lauriers fifty years ago. Pia, like her, would be a house mistress: she would be a mother: she would be, above and beyond all, the supreme, rare lover, pure as spring water, and passionate as a red Verona rose from the balcony of Verona's deathless girl.

It didn't come as a shock—quite the contrary, because I am twentieth century, almost all—to remember that this modern Juliet could round up cattle with the best of her brothers, and owned a diamond bracelet won on the public race-course of Randwick. It made me all the more in love with her. Because, of course, I was in love—perhaps before, but certainly after, that minute when I met her eyes as I came up the gangway, and knew that my foolish feat had won me Pia's heart.

I suppose one is a little mad, when one is asleep, to judge by the general craziness of dreams (you need not quote Freud to me; I take a plainsman's privilege of smacking him in the face). I suppose, therefore, that one is half a little mad, when half awake. With full waking, fairy castles fade, and rainbows shred away. It was the arrival of early morning coffee that spoiled half-waking dreams, for me. Once I had drunk it, the clear cold light of reason seemed to mingle, in that cabin, with the red of growing day; to tell me that I had better get up and bathe, dress, and remember, of all things, that I was leaving the ship tomorrow.

"When you are about it," added that chill monitor, "you might as well recollect that you haven't two hundred pounds in the world, no people, now, who matter; no position, and no prospects. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

I did, with the result that, dressed, I hurried off at at once to find the good-natured ship's gossip who, last night, had told me about everyone and everything on board. She had not had quite time to tell me everything—not for want of will, or slackness of tongue—but for the reason that Pia Laurier in a frock like a rose-carnation, passed, unattended, just as the gossip was getting to the point of an interesting tale, and I had abruptly arisen, and fled after the carnation frock and its wearer.

I had managed an introduction (no easy ship-made friendships for the daughter of the Lauriers) and enjoyed just about five glorious minutes of Pia's company, before the doctor, curse him, came along apologizing and grinning and reminding Pia that it was concert night, and that she was down for Number Two. So, just as we were getting

past the inevitable stage of "Beautiful voyage," and "Charming ship," and "Are you going far?" into "You like that too? How strange?"— "Why, that's my favorite also!"—"You really feel as if you had known me somewhere a long time ago?" and the inevitable reference to the days when one of us was a king (or queen) in Babylon, and the other a more or less Christian slave—just then, we had to break off and hurry into the staring, glittering music saloon, in company with everybody else.

There had been no more talk with Pia Laurier that night; for the concert lasted the usual hanged long time, and when it was over, Pia's relations, somehow, seemed to be everywhere, monopolizing her—maybe by accident, maybe not. And I should have gone very hungry to bed, had it not been for the crust I took with me. That crust was Pia's song. I knew she had been down for a fashionable, new song; it was on the program, but she did not sing it. She sang, instead, part of Liza Lehmann's exquisite bird-song cycle; sending me to my cabin with the sound in my ears of my lady's lovely little soprano telling the tale of the wood-dove and his mate who had nothing at all on which to start a home, but joyously they put a few sticks together, and sang—"It'll do—it'll do!"

I suppose I was vain. I suppose all men of a certain youth and vitality are.

At any rate, I thought that Pia meant the song for me.

SO, NEXT morning, I was agog to get hold of Mrs. Kipple, the good-natured newsmonger, and learn from her anything that might help me in making way with Pia. For I recognized, now, that the stars in their courses were fighting against me. I had only one day, a night, and half a day now left, if I was, in that brief time, to forge a chain that should in some measure link our lives. I needed every possible advantage I could make or steal. By Wednesday noon, the play would be over; the male Cinderella would have lost his pumpkin coach and gone home to sit in the ashes again; and there would be no fairy godmother to find him a second chance.

I remember Mrs. Kipple, though it's a good time since. I can recall her kindly, skinny face, and her stained veined hands, that knitted without pause all the time she talked. It made me think of a crab ceaselessly twiddling its feelers; and I wondered, absurdly, if the crab could talk while it did it.

Certainly Mrs. Kipple could talk. She did not confine herself to Laurier's biography this morning; she stooped to a lower range, and gave me also biography (gingered up till one might almost call it biology) of the actress troupe that had fairly dynamited the peace of the ship.

"My dear boy," she said, knitting till you could hardly see needle or fingers, "everybody thinks you did the bravest— No, I won't if you don't want me to. But it was. And not a man on the ship knows whether to present you with a medal, or tar and feather you—figuratively speaking, my dear boy, of course; figuratively. We all have the highest opinion— But you see, Miss Gin-Sling, I think her proper name, if there's anything proper in the question, which is doubtful—I mean, her name on the bills is Genevieve Treacher—well, Gin-Sling, or Jinny, or Genevieve, and her two friends, have simply captured all the eligible men; and what, I ask you, what does a respectable parent bring her daughters away from the Sydney winter and up to China for, unless—you know? Do you remember that too charming joke in an old *Punch*, about the child looking at a picture of the arena in Rome, and telling its mother that there was 'one poor lion that hadn't got a Christian.' My dear boy, there are quite a lot of those poor lions, or lionesses, on the ship, over since Brisbane, when these—ladies—got on. They haven't had a look-in with them. The ship's officers, who are simply meant to flirt with, and the rich planters who ought to marry, and the smart civil service folk—not a chance! Jinny Treacher and her girls have the lot. How can any of the Laurier crowd compete against sea-horse races? And they don't stop at sea-horse racing: I could tell you a tale—" She proceeded to tell it; I can only say that the biology came in at that point, and made me feel rather fidgety. One can't order a woman to hold her tongue, even when you think she's drawing the long bow about other women, and saying things that ought to be left to scandalmongers.

"Why do they want to tar and feather me?" I broke in, in order to stop her.

"Because Jinny Treacher's sure to fall in love with you! You saved her life!"

I may have blushed at this; I can't pretend that it was altogether disagreeable. As a matter of fact, I thought Miss Treacher—apart from female jealousies—an extremely attractive young person; and even if I had not thought so, it was something to score without even trying in a game that was being so whole-heartedly played by every man on the ship.

But Genevieve, or Gin-Sling, whatever one chose to call her—was not business. I wanted to hear about someone else.

"Are the Lauriers going far?" I asked.

"China and Japan: getting away from the Sydney cold weather. They go somewhere every winter, and always take a daughter with them. It's Pia's turn this time. They married off a daughter last year and I dare say they'll get rid of Pia this time."

Get rid of Pia!

"Is she engaged?" I asked, looking the kindly gossip fair in the face.

"Pia? I suppose more or less: a girl of her sort has always someone on the string. There was some talk of Sir Richard Fanshawe, the flying-man, but I imagine the mother was against it."

"Why?" I asked shamelessly. It would be well to know just what the plump, pigeony little woman, with a cooing voice and a hard watchful face, whom I had marked as Pia's mother, demanded for her girl.

"Not enough title. He's fairly rich—promoted a few successful companies in New Guinea, and so on—but he is only a war knight, without much family behind him. Pia ought to be at least a countess. Look at what that skinny ugly little school friend of hers, Sue Carpenter, picked up—Lord Chatteris, no less! I don't know if she's attached to the Fanshawe man, but I dare say she could detach herself, if something better— You know, a girl like that simply must marry into the very best set; she would be a fish out of water anywhere else."

I did not know whether any personal reference was wrapped up in all this package of chatter or not. With Mrs. Kipple, one could never tell. She was, like many gossips, not such a fool as she looked. I chose to think that she had been merely talking at large, and sat silent for a minute. It was a wonderful day of spangling glassy sun; the crests of the little waves spat fire; in the light-blue sky, the light-blue running sea, lurked, half peering out, half-hid, the exulting, malicious spirit that haunts these solitary places. "It's my God," I thought, "and I worship it; nothing will ever change that."

"THERE'S the second bell," said Mrs. Kipple, and got up. "If you don't hurry," she added warningly, "you don't get the best of the fruit." But I did not hurry. I didn't care if I never saw fruit again. Pia Laurier and her mother were coming up the promenade deck.

I thought the elder lady looked at me coldly. She was not a scrap like Pia, save in those small resemblances of carriage, shape of head and poise of limbs, that run through families. She had fair sleeked hair and eyes like sharp pins; she was dressed, shod, corseted with terrifying perfection, and about her clung like an aura that "power of the woman of fashion to daunt and repel," that seems to have crushed the gentle spirit of Emerson, in his time; that, with eighty further years of civilization, had certainly grown no less. Jinny Treacher had called me "the bravest man in the world;" but, under that look of Mrs. Laurier's, I felt my courage crumble, and my heart turn to water.

Deny it how you may, there is, in the scorn of a fashionable woman—a creature who has given herself up for life to the "mean admiration of mean things," the chase of stinking game—power both to humiliate and hurt. Small, burning spots of memory like scars made by drops of acid, mark such wounds, for many kindly, ordinary folk. The woman of hard-won position may be a snob, but never can be weak; she has sold her soul, and collected the price, and the price is what the devil has offered, from time immemorial—power. She uses it; she sends it like a Matthew's death-ray straight at the "outsider" whom she wishes to destroy, and no armor of self-respect, of conscious value in the things that are not mean, avails against it. It pierces.

Mrs. Laurier pierced me. But a man may fight when wounded. I answered her look by getting up from my seat, and taking a step forward. What I meant was to join the morning walk of herself and her daughter. I knew Pia now; I had a right to speak. And, gods of youth and beauty, but she was ensnaring, that pale-blue merry morning on the sea! The shape of

her little black head; the milk-pale profile set against the blue; the eye that sidewise shot its message out to me, while her face looked demurely forward—the beautiful arms and legs of her, showing out of her slim pink dress.

She was dragging her step; holding, a little, back. I would have been beside her in another moment—

"Good morning, Mr. Amory! Is it possible you don't know me, after saving me from a watery and fishy death no more than yesterday afternoon!"

It was "Gin-Sling." She had gone to her cabin, exhausted, after we reached the ship, and no one had seen her again that evening. Now she appeared, bright as a peony at a show, with her wonderful red hair teased out into a kind of halo, her thin body cased in some painted, vivid rag; her eyes and teeth sparkling, glass bracelets clinking, an anklet and a bell on it, jingling, feet—dancer's feet they were, small, but too muscular and spread—pointing and springing, as if they moved to invisible music. I think, so did Jinny Treacher through her life; she danced, marched, moved, to music of her own; ruled her days—so far as they were ruled—by laws not made of man. I have my reasons for handling her tenderly; I know what you do not, yet, of Jinny.

Naturally, I had to answer her. And naturally, too, the mother and daughter moved on, and I was left alone with Jinny Treacher.

She did not sit down. She put both feet together, and jumped high into the air, two or three times, with incredible vivacity. "That's how I feel," she said. "I always feel like that when the sun shines. Can't live in the dark. Spoiling my career, it is. They'd eat me up in London—I've been offered shop after shop—but I was born in Sydney, where it's daylight when it is daylight, and I've got the sun in my bones—I couldn't stick it anywhere they light the lamps at three. Singapore's where we're bound for; I and my friends. 'The Chinese Butterfly,' company number three. One of their girls has married and one died, and another wants to leave. So little me and mine come in, because the managing director of the company's a friend of ours."

I was not interested; I was raging over the loss of my chance of speaking with Pia—but you never knew Gin-Sling, if you think one could stand beside her, see her look into your eyes, and remain indifferent. She went to the head of any man, as swiftly as the drink after which she had, most appropriately, been named. She went to mine. But I didn't care. I knew I should sober again. There was that in the blue eyes of Pia to sober me after a dozen of Jinny's cocktails.

And it came into my mind there and then—I who had never wanted to marry before—that this was what true marriage might mean. Something that could hold a man in spite of himself, in spite of a world of Jinny Treachers.

GIN-SLING, however, had no mind to be neglected. "Take me for a walk," she said, half shutting her eyes and shooting fire at me from under heavily blacked lashes. She had beautiful sensuous eyelids, round and deep as white shells; they flickered constantly as she looked at you. She was one flicker from head to foot; a human flame.

I marched with her round the decks, and if anything could have made me forget Pia and her mother down below, that progress would have done it. It was like walking with royalty, to walk with Genevieve Treacher. Men shot looks of black envy, women glanced jealously aside. I could believe what Mrs. Kipple had told me, about the "lionless Christians," now. The look in those girls' faces said plainly: "So she has taken you too!" And I realized, what perhaps I had not understood before, that yesterday's incident had made me something of a celebrity; something worth the throw of a handkerchief. We strolled and talked I don't know what about. I didn't realize how long we had been walking, till I saw Mrs. Laurier come up from breakfast again. If she had looked at me chillingly before, her eyes were freezing now. She swept Jinny Treacher with a glance that should have turned the girl to a pillar of ice. I think Jinny felt it; but in sheer bravado, she turned her head, stopped almost in Mrs. Laurier's path, and remarked defiantly, "Well, here I am; what do you think of me?"

The main companion doorway was just beside me. Like a coward, I slipped through it and fled. I don't know to this day what happened; I only know that as I hurried down the staircase I saw Mrs. Laurier passing on, undisturbed.

A glimpse of Jinny's face came to me through a skylight. She seemed as one who had seen a daylight ghost.

"She's got the death-ray now," I thought, "I wonder how she likes it."

I hoped she wasn't hurt; you could not wish ill to her. But it was impossible not to know that my stock, with Mrs. Laurier, had now dropped yet another point below par—through Jinny.

All these things mattered little. What I wanted, what I was prepared to pull the ship in pieces to get, was another talk with Pia. I knew her mother would nose us out before long; still, the dining saloon, between meals, is a good place for quiet on almost any ship, and I hoped she would be there.

She was lingering over the last of her breakfast, alone at her table. Almost everyone else had gone; the stewards were setting their own meal at the other end of the saloon. It was a pleasant place, especially to one whose eyes had long been starved of everything beyond barest necessities. Blue satin curtains waving from open ports; chairs, panellings of brocade and bird's-eye maple; pictures let into walls; a great, gay arch overhead painted in colors and gold and filled with the shine of crystal and the green and rose of hanging gardens—all these things pleased me, made me catch a sigh as I descended the broad companion and remembered that after tomorrow's noon, the ship, the splendor, and the jewel so fittingly enshrined by it all, would be for Phil Amory, vagabond trader, but a fleck on the far horizon of the Coral Sea.

Pia was cutting open a passion fruit; the shells of several others lay about her plate. You can take quite a good while over a passion fruit, if you want to.

I ordered breakfast and asked if I might join her. She bowed her head a little coolly, and I remembered that one could see passing figures on deck from the open scuttles above us. You couldn't curse Gin-Sling, if you were a man like others, but if I had been extraordinary enough to dislike Jinny Treacher, I should certainly have cursed her then, in that she had shorn away a few of my inestimable moments; wasted them for me with the necessity of making explanations.

It took a little while. I had to tell Pia that I had been looking for her; thought she never would come up. I had to say that with my eyes about Jinny, which I could not, gallantly, say with my lips. Minutes ran away, and still Pia was playing with that most allegorical and significant passion fruit; still avoiding my eyes. At any moment Mrs. Laurier might come swiftly gliding down—she was amazingly quick and quiet for a small fat woman—at any minute launch the death-ray at me again. I was growing desperate, when, in an instant, the whole problem was solved, and the situation crystallized, by a steward.

He had come on board at Cairns, a temporary hand, meant to supply the place of one left in the hospital. He was hardly up to his job; plainly bewildered by the multitude of duties, the scores of new faces about him. He had just served me with breakfast, and I don't think he realized that Pia had not come in with me. As he planted my bacon and eggs down on the table, he asked me, in a perfectly audible voice, not untinctured with reproach— "What will there be for your lady, sir?"

I was dumb. Pia answered with perfect self-possession: "Nothing, thanks, I've had breakfast," and let him go in ignorance of the fact that he had just bracketed as husband and wife two people who had first met on the previous day.

I can see her still, as she caught my eyes with her own—and weren't those two blue wells of truth—sparkling with mischievous merriment! She pursed her lips up, pretended to be terribly shocked, but it was a gay pretence. Her mother might have thought it correct to faint under the table; and if she had thought it correct, would have undoubtedly done so, in the best possible style, with an entirely correct disposition of ankles. But the neo-Georgian girl does not faint, literally or metaphorically, before the idea of being somebody's wife. We both laughed consumedly, and I went on with my eggs and bacon, and that was all there was of it. All, except for the splendid fact that the ice had been broken between us. We fairly burst into conversation.

I DON'T know what we talked about at first. It was like orchard-robbing—when you run from one tree to another plucking, eating, cramming, hurrying, intent on getting as much as you can in the few minutes before you are found and chased out by the farmer with the cart-whip. You hardly know what you have had, in the end, only that it has been fun.

By and by all the stewards had breakfasted and gone, and somebody was dusting at the far end of the saloon; and bells sounded, of which we took no note. We were too busy orchard-robbing. I remember about this time, that we began to tell each other the story of our lives. Pia had got to the diamond bracelet, and the day she rode for it and won it on Randwick racecourse; and an interesting incident that had the Prince of Wales in it—when suddenly she checked herself, and said—

"It's all such tosh, isn't it? You live a real life. Tell me some secrets and adventures in New Guinea."

Now I don't know what had helped her to read me as she did; but it is a fact that while she was talking, something that was both a secret and an adventure—and a big one of both kinds—had been floating about in my consciousness. I had never spoken of it, never hinted it, to a soul. It was my chief and almost only reason for burying myself on the wild west coast as a trader, beyond call of civilization; and it might be in the end, the means of setting me free to choose between the wild life and the tame; to choose, indeed, between any and all of the goods of this purchasable world. I had been sitting on the secret with the persistency of wild-fowl on an egg—and now, in an instant, behold it discovered, given over to the girl whom I had not yet known forty-eight hours.

"There is an adventure," I said, glancing about the emptied, silent saloon. The sun had changed oddly; it was pouring straight down, now, through the flowers of the hanging garden, on to the center table, though ten minutes ago, or thereabouts, it had seemed to come aslant through the ports. The stewards had ceased clashing and rattling huge masses of silver, in some invisible retreat behind the saloon, and there was a faint clink of cups audible.

From the deck above came the steady tramping and scuffing of feet, the sound of voices; now and the a shriek of laughter, where Genevieve Treacher, no doubt, was holding merry court.

"I've never told any one," I went on. Pia nodded, as if to say, "Of course: not till I came." It was amazing, how we talked without words, that morning on the sea.

"I've explored a bit," I went on. "Not much. It takes money. But I know something. There was an expedition starved out, years ago, between two unknown rivers, and just as it had to turn back, they saw something wonderful. It was so wonderful that the leader of the expedition just looked at it, and came away, and never said a word to any one—his mate died on the way back—but he always meant to go back, as soon as he could get the money to fit out again, because he knew there might be a fortune in it. Well, he never did; he died too—"

"Does every one die in Papua?" cut in Pia. The faint sea-rose underlying the ivory of her face was just a little dimmed.

"Well, it isn't exactly a sanatorium out back—but the towns—"

"Never mind about the towns. Tell me the secret. Did your friend who died give it to you?"

"No. He left it to the woman he had been engaged to, only she—she—"

"Died?"

"No. She was dead when he left it to her—I can't help it; you mustn't think everybody dies there any more than they do in other places."

I was growing breathless, with my desire to explain away the difficulty that haunts all residents of the dark land in the presence of listening strangers. It is a fact that our tales are full of death and destruction; it is also a fact that statistics show nothing very alarming in the way of an annual death rate. I don't know how the contradiction can be explained, but I do know that both sets of facts are true.

"She was dead," I went on, "and I couldn't find out anything about her people, and his diary was in my hands, so I simply kept it, partly because I didn't suppose anybody would believe it but myself, and partly because I wasn't going to have any one else trying. No, he had no relations either—"

"But the secret, what was it?"

I LOOKED round again before speaking; almost I thought I heard the tramp of feet. But that was not likely, no one came there at that hour of the day. I was going on, when Pia jumped out of her seat as if a bucket of water had been poured over her, and without a word bolted up the wide staircase. Her flying heels disappeared on deck, just at the moment when a stately procession, through some unknown ship's alleyway, entered the saloon. The captain,

the purser, the doctor, the chief steward, all in white, all sparkling in their several degrees with gold buttons, gold stripes, gold epaulets, gold cap bands. Eleven o'clock inspection, nothing less!

"Gosh!" I murmured, collecting myself, and standing up. The captain paused, gave me a kindly nod, and asked me if I was none the worse for yesterday's adventure; said one or two polite things, and passed on. The chief steward eyed me with disapproval; chief stewards, owing to their anomalous position, are always somewhat soured, and I could see that he didn't think passengers were in place, in the dining saloon, between meals. They were all gone in a minute, and I had time to recollect myself, and bless the ready ears of Pia Laurier.

I did not go out on deck; I did not want to. What I wanted was to be alone, and remember every little thing she had said, done, and looked, in that amazing two hours. It was impossible that Pia should have fallen in love with me—impossible, I kept telling myself fiercely. A girl like that—a girl who had the world at her feet—a girl brought up—

Well, but if she were not in love, a girl brought up like that, what had she been doing? Flirting outrageously, reasonlessly, with a man she didn't know anything about; a man of whom her family certainly disapproved. If she were not in love with me, I was bound to suppose that this sort of thing was her ussual habit; that she would dodge away from her people to "carry on" below decks, with any one and every one. There was no getting away from it; if I were not especially favored, then lovely face, pure eyes, never on earth had lied as did the face, the eyes, of Pia Laurier.

After all—that plunge yesterday, the sharks!—I did not want to shake hands with myself over an exploit that was nothing at all, compared to the things one had had to do as a matter of routine, day by day, during the not-yet-forgotten great war; still, I could not deny that it might have looked well to a girl who didn't know anything about battlefields. Certainly Jinny Treacher—

There was no getting away from Gin-Sling. I had not been in my cabin ten minutes when I heard a vivacious sound in the alleyway, odd stamping and scrambling, cries of a strangely mingled kind— "Loo, loo! Sick him, sick him! Houp-la-yoicks! Drink hearty, we'll soon be dead—" a phrase, this last, that I had already recognized as Jinny Treacher's favorite war-cry. It had little to do with drink; she was no drunkard—it embodied, I rather fancy, her philosophy of life; broke down into common speech quotations of which she had never heard, and expressed in brief the craving all men feel for joy, snatched hastily upon the heel of dark.

I don't mean to say that I thought all this while Jinny and her crew were battering, as they proceeded at once to batter, upon my bolted door. It was days later, when I had time to think, time to burn, time to pile up in useless rotting heaps of hours and minutes, that I formulated the philosophy of Gin-Sling. At the moment I felt nothing but gratification and dismay; the latter certainly strongest. And if you wonder how one could be gratified and dismayed at the same moment, over a lady's rather intimate call, I can only answer that you did not know Jinny.

Of course I had to open; and then the meaning of certain strange pawing and scratching sounds became plain; also the strangle-hold that Jinny clearly possessed, over the male inhabitants of the ship. A dozen men—mostly youthful and frivolous—were down on their hands and knees on the alleyway carpet, pretending to be hounds. Jinny, with her jockey cap on her head, and a dog-whip in hand, was imitating a huntsman—according to her lights, which were perhaps not of the brightest. "Sick him, Towser," she cried. "Ss—ss! Trusty! Pull him out, tear him!" Two youths, howling dismally, tugged me forth and rolled me unresisting on the carpet. I played up, and acted death, wondering all the time what on earth it was about, and wishing myself well out of it. For the truth is that we who leaped from childhood into sudden, hard maturity, under the bellowing teachers of the Ardennes, have little play left in us.

NOT immediately was I to be enlightened; the sudden appearance on the scene of Mrs. Kipple prevented that. I cannot pretend to say why that worthy lady turned up at an unwonted hour among the sleeping cabins, on a deck that wasn't hers, though perhaps one may be allowed to guess, in view of the fact that Jinny's crew was making noise enough to wake the dead. At all events, she did appear, and Jinny, shouting, caught hold of her.

"In at the death!" she yelled. "You must be blooded." She ran a forefinger across her rouged lips, and smeared Mrs. Kipple's cheek with a fiery cross.

Mrs. Kipple, smiling a smile that had something of the quality of the Laurier death-ray in it, submitted. I think she was fully paid, by the hope of being the first to report another "disgraceful riot."

That woman should have been a Yankee journalist. "Scoops" were her passion.

"Now may one ask," she said, "why you are ill-treating our hero?"

"Damn," I muttered, head on the carpet. "I can't stick hero."

Nobody heard me; the youths were pretending to sit up and beg from the huntsman—and Jinny was patting their heads and calling them good dogs.

"Oh," she answered to Mrs. Kipple's demand, "that's just it; we don't mean to let a hero skulk, especially when everybody's looking for him to present an address."

I had to beg Mrs. Kipple's pardon immediately, because in the heat of the moment, I said—exactly what you would have said. It was no use, however; they were determined to have me out, and have me out they did. And a little later, in the music-room, the doctor read an address that made me feel one blush from scalp to sole, afterwards presenting me with the beastly thing, to keep.

AND after the horrid ceremony, Jinny, in a solemn processional way, marched out before me, blowing imaginary trumpets, until we reached the companion, when she dropped her dignity, called "Houp-la! Get out of the way," and shouldered through a press of passengers.

It was Mrs. Kipple's luck alone that prevented her being smitten in the face by the preposterous heel of Jinny's shoe, as Jinny slid gorgeously down the banisters, right on to the mat before the saloon door.

Sky and sea pale blue with a laugh in the heart of it, and a hint of coming dark that shadowed the laugh, even as some subconscious thought of time that flies, beauty that passes, was wont to shadow the sun of Jinny's merriment. Light, golden still, but thick as honey, spilled like honey in long pools about the decks, sliding and moving as the steamer swayed upon her course. Gulls screaming about the mast-heads, as they scream at break of even. In fine, my last day almost gone. My voyage over, all but the night and a useless hour or two of early morning; for we were not, after all, to run into Thursday Island; a tender was to meet the ship, and take the passengers off.

What had I done; where was the link that I had sworn should bridge the space between Pia Laurier's life and mine, somehow, before I left the ship? The answer was—nothing; nowhere.

JINNY and her crew had never left me alone, from morning until now. The two other girls had been pressed into service; they with Jinny's special posse of youthful admirers, and last, never least, Gin-Sling herself, had combined to keep every moment occupied. Jazzing on the promenade deck; "treasure-hunting" all over the ship, with a lock of red curly hair as prize (and at the last it turned out amid screams of laughter, to be a curl cut from a setter dog in charge of the ship's butcher). Tea in the captain's cabin; the three girls, the chief officer, the captain, and myself. A special entertainment this, got up to do me honor, which I loathed, but could not avoid—all these things had eaten, minute by minute, hour by hour, into my precious afternoon, until now it was near sunset, and the west toward which we were running, gateway of the Old World's East, was red with the life blood of the last day Pia and I might ever know, together.

There wasn't a man on the ship who did not envy me, I think, for Jinny made me her partner in every game, and if I did not kiss her a dozen times or more, behind funnels, deckhouses, inside alleyways and down companions, it was not because she did not give me a fair chance of doing so. I suppose I was freely credited with what I did not take. At any rate I caught the stinging tail of a joke or two while passing the smoke-room windows on one of Jinny's wild "plays."

She may have been touched also. At all events she paused, and with a self-possession I had not thought to be in her, faced me, and asked straight out—

"Why don't you like me, Mr. Phil Amory?"

"But of course I do," I answered her. We had pre-empted a vacant space of deck; I remember Jinny was standing, rather tall and very thin, against an indescribably glorious volcano-burst of sunset. I could see

nothing of her face; she must have seen mine outlined in sharpest light, no camouflage, no reserves possible.

"You don't," she stated, coolly. "Not after saving my life and all."

"Liking!" I said. "No, I don't *like* you. If I saw more of you, I should love you. But liking—that's another thing."

Jinny puzzled this out. She was not used to subtleties. But she could jump to conclusions with fearsome swiftness, and she jumped now, skipping intermediate links.

"I know what you mean by love," she said, and suddenly, coarsely, she turned and spat into the water.

"Do you know," she said, and now she turned so that I could see her face; the bird-like eyes, gold eyes rimmed with dark; the desirous, beautiful mouth, the circling hair—"Do you know what the square emerald ring on Pia Laurier's hand is?"

"Ring?" I said stupidly. Most men notice rings scarce at all. I remembered seeing jewels on Pia's tanned brown-satin wrist—or was it on the fingers, with the dainty white V-marks between, where the sun had spared to strike?

"Do you know who set the fashion?"

"I didn't know it was a fashion," I answered, still hopelessly at sea.

"It was Princess Mary—when she got engaged. All the smart girls have wanted square emeralds ever since. Smoke that."

She whirled, one of her dancer whirls, and left me. "Come on, girls," I heard her crying, down the deck. "Get the gramophone going again. 'Nother dance—drink hearty, we'll soon be dead."

SO LITTLE did I understand what she meant, that I was conscious, at first, only of relief. She had let me go; ceased playing with me as a cat plays with a mouse, that tries to free itself ceaselessly, and ceaselessly is patted back again. I could go where I liked, I could hunt up Pia Laurier, who had not been visible all afternoon. Part of my coinage of golden hours was still unspent; I must husband it, use it wisely. Pia—Jinny—

I was hurrying towards the music-room, an excellent strategic point for viewing the main companion and the decks—when the full meaning of Jinny's remarks, and of her fierce "Smoke that!" broke on me.

Princess Mary had fancied a square emerald for an engagement ring. Princess Mary had made square emerald engagement rings popular with the set to which Pia Laurier belonged. Pia wore a square emerald ring—I remembered—fatally I remembered now!—on her third left finger.

Three times, then—by my poverty, by her position, and by the significance of that ring—Pia was not for me.

The pure face, the beautiful eyes, had lied after all. She was a common flirt. I had made myself notorious by my rescue of Jinny Treacher; Miss Laurier had stooped, like a pedigreed dog that deigns to rob a mongrel of its bone, and filched away Gin-Sling's little-worth capture. She did not want me, but she had made pretty play of pretending she did—in order to score over Jinny, the devourer of hearts.

I believed what Jinny had said; I was very sure she was no liar. It was merely a determination to leave no stone unturned that made me decide I would see Pia once more before I left the ship, and ask her to her face if what I heard was true. Mrs. Kipple had told me—but it seemed Mrs. Kipple was not infallible; few gossips are.

Once, across the saloon that night, I saw the clear profile, the beautifully shaped black head. Once, on deck, the rose-geranium perfume that Pia Laurier used, came floating across a little space of dark, and I saw a pale dress pass—hesitate—go on again. I did not move; I said no word. If I am angry, I am angry. That night I had rather taken the velvet neck of Pia in my hands and twisted it back till it gave way, cracking, in my hands (as I have twisted the neck of a German, rolling together in trench mud) than held her and kissed her as I had not yet done.

IT WAS very early when the engines came to rest next morning, and the ship, her way stopped, lay still upon the celadon-blue waters that surround Goode Island.

Here the tender from Thursday was to meet us, and here my false splendors were to end. Phil Amory, bit of war wastage, trader from the back end of nowhere, was "to be taken to the place from whence he came." And if, once arrived there, he chose to hang himself by the neck till he was dead, it would be nobody's business but his own.

My suitcases were on deck, my steward tipped, the tender rising and falling below the ladder, on which I was just about to set

foot, when the sound of my name, clearly and almost precisely spoken, made me look round.

I had meant to go without seeing her again. I had forgotten that there was any feeling save my own, and any will but mine, in question, though I might have remembered since my thought was so set on jewels and what they signified, the meaning of that diamond bracelet of Pia's; the trophy she had won upon Randwick course, struggling, with a tornado in her lungs, and the fury of a thoroughbred stallion barely held in by her small hands, for victory, in a crowd of riders stronger, more ruthless than herself; death at her elbow, defeat, scarcely less bitter, only inches away. I might have known that that girl, modern of the moderns, bravest of the brave, would not, like one of her Edwardian forebears, take my defection for granted, and go to her sewing and her prayers.

She did not. She had got up at dawn, dressed herself in something that was like a spray of lilac blossom (though even my inexperience could gauge the alarming value of that piece of French simplicity) and was there, at the head of the accommodation ladder, holding out her hand, the hand that did not bear the emerald ring.

I could not refuse to take it. I felt her cool fingers in mine, for one everlasting moment; and it was as if they came, in that moment, home, where they had always belonged. I don't know which of us first let go. I don't know what we said—something about leaving early, and having been busy; words that did not matter at all. I know that in one moment, with the tender dancing below and the luggage gone, and the passengers who were to join coming up the ladder, I realized that I had been an incredible fool, and that it was too late to do anything at all about it. If she was engaged—if she wasn't—she liked me. Me. She had not been flirting. Her eyes were dark with sleeplessness, and the shadow that comes of love denied. She looked at me, and made the little movement with her lips that means . . . you know. And I would have given five years of my life for the chance—impossible now—of taking her in my arms and kissing her very breath away.

All round us there were deckhands scrubbing, stewards carrying things, the fourth officer was posted at the head of the ladder, a stewardess, armored in white starch—God knows what she wanted there—was gaping in the nearest doorway. Passengers, new arrivals, began to shove past Pia and myself, coming between us. "Sir," said some cursed person, "if you want to go ashore, you'd better not keep the tender; captain's anxious to get away." The tender, backing him up, began to roar disgustingly, and on the top of it all the steamer's whistle suddenly bellowed like a thousand bulls.

I DON'T know what I'd have done—missed my passage, maybe, and trusted to luck to see me back from the East when I had spent every coin I owned, getting there—if, at that minute, a very tall, thin man had not come up the ladder, pushed determinedly between Pia and myself, and taken her by both hands. He kept pumping her wrists up and down, and staring at her as if he could never have enough of it. He was extremely handsome—sharp, regular features, somewhat marred by a brief, George V beard, chestnut hair clipped close to keep it from waving, large, brown, hard eyes, figure of an athlete. I could have cheerfully split his skull with an ax. I knew who he was without asking; but if confirmation was needed, I had it when an obsequious steward rushed forward, treading on my toes as he went, and bleated—"What cabin, Sir Richard? Shall I take your luggage, Sir Richard?"

Instantly the whole weight of the social system by and in which the clan of Lauriers lived, seemed to press down upon me like a giant hand, pushing, relentlessly, Pia and myself apart. I saw in one thousand-faceted vision, the world my people had owned and lost; its myriad reserves, defences, shibboleths, its fierce prides and pitiless scorns; its solid pedestal of property, lifting all who belonged to it far, very far above the mud and dust in which we others must go.

I saw the stately rhythm of Laurier life, English in solidity and harmony, Australian in its startling freedoms, such as that which permitted Pia to ride and win amateur races in public; but always the same, always unalterably convinced of its own essential rightness and sufficiency. I saw the rebel wildness of my own, the Gipsy spirit in it that was as the salt of life to me, and realized, as I had not done before, the price I paid for all that. I had been fool

enough to think I had it free. Folly! What was ever given free on earth?

The tense moment passed. Sir Richard had let go Pia's hand; was busying himself with the traveler's eternal preoccupation of baggage. I had seen what I had seen, and I knew, as well as if I had had an hour to think it all out, instead of a couple of seconds, that what was—for Pia—was best. I could wreck her engagement if I chose—of this I was sure—but I was equally sure that if I could, I would not. I would drop out of her world as I had dropped in. The male Cinderella's pumpkin coach was ready; his hour had struck; back to the ashes! and let the fairy princess stay in her palace, undisturbed.

If I was sick at heart, as I went down that endless stair, I was doubtless no worse than many millions elsewhere who were sick of heart that day, and of the same disease. So I tried to tell myself, when the tender was reached, and I had found a seat on the roof of the cabin, and the engine was beginning to turn over with loud spatting and drumming noises. So I tried to believe, when I saw the face of Pia looking down at me from the rail, a long, long way above, and felt her eyes fall on me like the light of a star, strange, sad, remotely fair. I, who was merry enough by nature, had no laughter left in me that day, else I think I must have been amused at the sudden sight of Mrs. Laurier, arrived too late, shooting her celebrated death-ray at me "with intent," as she stood, kimono-clad, in the alleyway door. Or at the other, fairer vision on the ship's sacred bridge—I knew at once that only Jinny could thus profane the high altar—holding an imaginary glass to its lips, waving an arm at me, and shouting what I guessed at, but could not hear—"Drink hearty, we'll soon be dead!"

Then the tender champed and fussed away, and the ship receded faster and faster, and that chapter in my life was done.

CHAPTER III

THE MANGROVE WALL

I CAME back to Daru, off western Papua, on a brimming tide, that masked the mud-flats with acres of reflected island, miles of bright mirrored sky. The lawns, green as lettuce, the leaning palms, the red roofs of the little, tin-built houses, showed clear as pictures in stained glass, above and below the tide-line. The high, angry sky—there is always a threat of storm about the skies of Daru—seemed to fill heaven and earth, as I ran, scattering clouds beneath the forefoot of the cutter, to my anchorage. Over against the island, that lay there piping its weak note of protest against the savagery of stone-age Papua ran, long, mysterious, dusk, the curving mangrove wall that flings defiance in the face of civilization; lifts, to the ear attuned, its own gigantic organ sound, singing things primal, never-to-be-changed. And if you think that, in this, I speak of the rustle of leaves, sounds of water lapsing downward through twisted roots to sea, I ask your pardon. I have, ill-manneredly, used in your presence a language that is not yours.

The dream that I had dreamed on the great liner clung about me still, but only as the aftermath of an opium carouse may cling about a man who has left behind him, days and miles away, the place where he drank and dreamed. With every hour the memory of those wild visions grows weaker; incredible blossoms, great as thrones in a fairy palace, and gemmed with dew outspangling diamonds and emeralds; piled wonders of tower on tower, of crystal mile-long windows, crepitating with lights; marvel of faces fairer than the face "that launched a thousand ships" and limbs more beautiful than flowers that float in a mountain lake at dawn—these fade. The dreamer sheds the last thin, iridescent rags of his dream; stands bare to the bare, gray world once more.

So it was with me, when I reached the Daru roadstead. I anchored, slung my dinghy out (for I had made the hundred and twenty mile run across from Australia, alone) got pratique from the thin, young Government official who rowed out to meet me, changed with him the news of the island—native dances; catches of dugong; patrols gone out up the Fly, patrols come back; batches of prisoners from the cannibal tribes inland; ("Keep me a good cooky out of the lot," I begged, knowing that your tamed man-eater is matchless in the kitchen) calls of the schooner *Aramea*, calls of the tiny "Papuan Chief" from Port Moresby—news of the latest exploring expedition from England or America, which had gone, as they mostly go, up to somebody's plantation and somebody else's

police camp, and hurried home to collect the acclamations of the British public, on the fact of having ventured—"where never white man trod before—" rumors, wild but true, concerning the deeds of the A. R. M.'s (Asst. Res. Magistrates) with half a handful of police, and a tucker-box or two, weeks beyond the mysterious regions of the Alice River, in the genuine unknown—all this, and more, I heard, while we sat cheerfully on the cutter's hatch, my dinghy and the official whaleboat lying still as "painted ships upon a painted ocean." The pipe of peace in Penley's mouth and mine, and in our hearts the leisure and the long, long thoughts, that live out back, and out back only.

By-and-by, I slung my gear together, looked to the cable of the cutter, rowed myself ashore and pulled the dinghy up on the stones. Purchase had gone ahead with his police; I walked alone up the endless stretch of Daru jetty. The tide, now, was running fast away to sea, and the coming sunset was reflected in sheets of muddy flame upon the flats left bare. I had slipped through the magic door, got myself into the fourth dimensional world that lies beyond the world that most men know. Time here was not time. Life was subtly changed; oneself was changed. And what one wanted—what we all wanted, the A. R. M.'s and patrol officers with their amazing, terrible journeys; the traders who lived lives devoid of comfort and amusement; the men who were neither true trader nor Government officer, just Gipsies like myself—was the thing that one can never define, though one give one's body to be destroyed and one's soul to be starved, for love of it—the "Something Lost."

IF THE thought of Pia Laurier came back to me, in my trading store behind the beach of Daru, I think it came as a chime of bells comes, from some distant clock-tower, sounding often, scarcely heard; part of one's life, yet scarcely remembered unless, for any reason, its music is withdrawn. Possibly I would have told any one who asked, that I did not think of her.

She had gone through my life as a sudden gust of wind goes through a house, scattering the common things of hourly use, breaking the mirrors, slamming windows and doors, sending papers and letters away down streets, and making the place look as if nothing would ever be the same again.

But winds pass by, and household gods are gathered and set up once more. The wind that was Pia had blown, and passed, —I thought.

One trace it had left. I could not keep from thinking of Sir Richard Fanshawe. He troubled me. Not so much because he was going to marry Pia, though that was a spot of raw pain, never unnecessarily to be touched, but because of a certain, odd, floating resemblance in his face to something, some one undetermined, that had struck me, in those few moments upon the ladder of the ship. It worried me as a name, half forgotten, worries; and that is like a loose tooth in the mouth. You remember—"I know the *shape* of the name—I know it begins with E—it's a soft name, fluffy, had it there, almost! Come out, come out! I'll remember it in a minute—gone again, damn!—E—E—Eb, Ec, Ed, Ef, Eg. What is it? Hang the thing, I'll forget about it; it doesn't matter anyhow. What was I doing before?" Driven away, the worry returned like a wasp, buzzing and darting, utterly trivial, yet utterly maddening. Only one remedy, to find out the name, catch the wasp and beat it flat.

I could not catch my wasp.

It troubled me at the oddest moments. My store—I think I have not told you—was almost on the beach. It stood perched upon high piles, with a flight of rough steps leading up and in. There were palm trees all round it; they made, day through and night through, the dry-papery rustle that only palms can make. The interior was one large dusk cave, with light that fell from doors set at each end. At first, you didn't see much; in a minute or two, the shining clusters of tin billycans and pannikins in the roof, and the piled strata of cottons, red, yellow, pink and green, and the loin-cloths and the yard-long knives, and the strings of beads, like strange little fruits, and the plates and the lanterns and the sacks of rice and the towers of tinned meats and fish, became dimly visible, each in its place.

There was always a wind blowing through, from door to door, and the red loin-cloths, festooned on strings, were always waving gently in it, and the billycans lightly swinging, with a sound like the beat of tiny cymbals. And there was a mossy and fishy

smell from the reef, not unpleasant, and a warm whiff of frangipanni flowers; for Daru is full of these. And through the two doors there used to come a dazzle of furious green, green that burned, and after midday, the plate-glass glitter of the sea. Daru, Daru by the western boundary of Papua, where civilization stops, ships come seldom, and time is marked by rise and set of sun—Daru, an island, filled with the spirit of the islands, holds in its heart, though it is western Pacific, the secret of the true South Seas.

ALL very well, and I felt it, as I moved about among my cottons and tins, bargaining with wild fellows from the Fly for a canoe load of coconuts, selling tinned meat for turtle-shell, rice for a catch of trocas. I felt it, and liked it, for I had tasted the honey of the South Sea world, and its flavor was pleasant to recall, though in truth the strong liquor of the western islands suited me best. But why—why was the store, and the blaze of green bush and dazzle of sea water, seen through its open doorway and the smells of reef and shell and frangipanni flower—aye, and the very winds that blew unendingly from door to door—why was all this connected in my mind with Richard Fanshawe, airman, company promoter, wealthy man and future custodian of Pia Laurier's life?

I could not tell. Often I did not think of it. I was reasonably busy as a trader, and my beat, up and down the coast in the cutter, was a long one; the crucial peak of solvency had just been reached, and passed, and I was beginning to send money up to Port Moresby Bank. Not much, heaven knows—when I had bought new stock with most of my windfall, and got the cutter's engine repaired with the rest, I hadn't more than ten pounds left to the good. But still, it was prosperity, or the dawn of that pleasant condition; and it promised, in due time, the fulfilment of my dream of exploration. Nothing in the world to do with Sir Richard Fanshawe, far above me and my little affairs, as Pia Laurier was above us both.

Where was the connection? I would have given much to know. But weeks passed, and I was no nearer recalling the vague, three-parts forgotten thing that linked Sir Richard Fanshawe to Daru and its sea-scents and windy doorways, and my little trading store.

And now I have to relate when, and in what manner, enlightenment came.

I HAD gone up to the residency on an afternoon when there was something doing more than usual; the R. M. was back from a wild patrol beyond the utmost rim of civilization or knowledge; an A. R. M. and a patrol officer happened to be "in" at the same time, and this was an occurence so unusual as to warrant, fairly, a dinner-party. David Bassett, the R. M., a very good friend of mine, had sent a prisoner to my store with a note—

DEAR AMORY:

Come around to dinner if you can. Northanger and Purchase are back. No particular food, but a good deal of yarning. Have you an egg? If so send or bring it, under careful escort.

Yours,

D. BASSETT.

I sent him all the eggs I could muster. In Papua, you must know, eggs are the test of popularity, the medium by which friendship, servility, hope, esteem, all find expression. You borrow eggs from prudent people; beg them from any one who you think may be fool enough to give; buy where you can (but that is seldom), present to your sweetheart, your chum, your friend in the hospital; bring, with a servile grin, to the man in high position, the man who has lent you money, or can get you promotion. The egg, in Papua, is the true social barometer. . . . I had eggs, and always gave Bassett some when he asked for them. Bassett was R. M., and could be useful to me; besides which, I liked him; furthermore, on this occasion, I was going to be asked to eat the eggs, or help to do so.

Following my eggs, I went up to the residency, and found my way, unannounced, into the mosquito-room, so named illogically, because it is not supposed to harbor mosquitoes. Several men, like large joints of meat enclosed in a rather small meat safe, were sitting within the transparent hessian walls. I had expected three, but I saw four. Who else, besides Northanger and Purchase, I wondered, was "in"? The schooner *Aramea* had just crossed from Thursday Island, but I hadn't heard that any one was expected.

"Hallo, here's Black Sheep," somebody said; and my host began introducing.

"Northanger, Purchase, you know the

Black Sheep, Mr. Spicer, Mr. Amory."

The newcomer—he was a fattish man with extremely flat feet and a sleeked head of fairish hair; young, good-looking in a disgusting sort of way, and dowered with an excess of the manner sometimes miscalled "Oxford"—fixed me with a cool stare, and demanded of the R. M.— "Why do you call him Black Sheep?"

"Mostly because his eyes are black, and his hair, and partly because he's a decent sort of chap," replied Bassett, staring back, at the fattish man.

Mr. Spicer immediately dropped me out of notice, took a watch from his pocket, and yawned.

Bassett rang the bell for dinner.

"Who is he?" I asked in a whisper, of Northanger, as we went into the dining-room, a clean, polished, rather prisonlike apartment, that shouted in every foot of its barren expanse its owner's bachelor condition.

"Fellow who's come across to make arrangement for some mineral prospecting crowd," answered Northanger, a little wearily. "They're going to—"

"Explore the country," I filled in.

"Yes, and cross—"

"From Papua to the other side," I answered like a chorus.

"And go where never a—"

"Never a white man's been before."

"Exactly," answered the A. R. M., with the tired expression still prominent. We filed in. "Why did you ask him?" I found time to demand of Bassett. And Bassett, looking at me with large sad eyes, answered simply—"I never did; he wished himself on the party," and took his seat.

Through the turtle soup, through the fish, through the roast of dugong, and the inevitable custard pudding and tinned pears, Mr. Spicer talked, with just so many pauses as would allow of his eating an excellent dinner. It seemed that he had acquaintances among most of the titled families of England; that they all valued him highly, and that he had been chosen to come ahead and organize the expedition, by a mass meeting of marquises, dukes and earls.

"This" he did not forget to tell us, "is Empiah stuff. Nothing Colonial about it. Development of the British Empiah, on which the sun never sets. Our chief, Sir Richard Fanshawe—"

At this point, my slack attention tightened. "Your *what?*" I rapped. "Who did you say?" For I thought—being bored half asleep—that my ears were playing me false. So often had that name hummed in my head, between sleeping and waking, that I could believe I was hearing it actually spoken by some one else.

"Sir Richard Fanshawe, K. C. V. O. Celebrated airman in the War. Extremely successful manager of companies devoted to the extension of Empiah interests. Chief in this matter, if any one is chief but myself. I expect him to follow very shortly, via Port Moresby."

"I don't know that I've heard—" began Bassett doubtfully; but Spicer cut him short.

"Then you ought to have heard. Certainly you ought. You hear now. Sir Richard Fanshawe, K. C. V. O. I expect him—"

I don't know what it was—maybe the new interest, the fresh channel of feeling opened up by Spicer and his talk; maybe the mention from an unexpected quarter of Fanshawe's name—but something, at that moment, set off a fuse beneath the long dormant part of my memory, and exploded it into action. I knew, with certainty, where and how I had seen Sir Richard Fanshawe before—my God, I knew!

In the next chapters Amory discovers that Fanshawe knows his secret and he in turn remembers something startling about Fanshawe's past.

The first story written by a man who knows and loves Flying

Metal Props

By Billy Parker

"IT'S tough these days," remarked Ed, as he lit that stud of a cigar he always seemed to smoke—"nothing ever happens these days to break the dull monotony of this flying game—same old seven and six, seven days a week—week in and week out."

"Yes," I answered, "I've been ready to chuck the whole damn thing a dozen times myself during the past winter, and these new birds give me a pain—once in a while a real fellow, but the majority of these new fliers are a different class than we knew twelve or fourteen years ago, Ed—remind me of a bunch of carnival followers.

"You are right, Bert, but we'll hope for better days, we've seen better ones, and they'll come again. Well, guess the boys have finally got that new kite ready—see you later."

Ed Miller, chief test pilot for Air Transit Airplanes, Inc. got up, stretched himself, and ambled over to where the assembly crew had just wheeled out a new job—a beautiful little ship finished in army O. D. lacquer, and powered with the new J4 two hundred horsepower radial motor. The last ships powered with the J4 had been whizzes —1200 feet a minute, and 138 miles an hour with full load, but this new ship promised to be even better, since Stearlock, the engineer, had cleaned it up considerably more than the standard jobs, and was using a wing section that promised great things in an ideal combination of high speed and fast climb.

Well, while Ed was firing up, and getting all set to run preliminary tests, I went into the hangar and cleaned up a bit, for I was sure dead tired and dirty, too. Just back from a three-day trip with two oil men, Oklahoma City, Texas panhandle, Ft. Worth, Tulsa, Kansas City and home to Wichita. If you don't think that's a tiresome trip, just load two big men and baggage into a little standard 90-horse Air Transit on a good hot day and start out. I'll bet you're ready for a rest when you get back.

WHEN I came outside, Ed was up about 3500 in the new J4 job, putting her through—and boy, believe me she was going through in some fine style. Talk about a ship that would climb looping—this baby was *it* with

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a capital I. A loop every half minute, and right on up-stairs till it was near out of sight. Then old Ed spun her down to 2000 and rolled her all the way across the field, following that with whip stalls—power dives, and finally a short speed test close to the ground, for his own satisfaction before he came in.

"Want to fly her, Bert?"

"Sure do," I answered, and was just about to take off, when Harry Mills, vice-president and general manager of the company, came up the road from town hell bent for breakfast.

"Better wait a minute," shouted Ed—"something in the air."

Ed needn't have told me that, for I could see that Mills had brought these parties that he had with him out to see the new ship, so I cut off the gas, closed the switches, and climbed out.

Mills introduced the two strangers to Ed, who began at once to take much pains to show them the ship, as he always does when prospects come around the field—and believe me that boy can show a ship off to its best advantage if there is a man alive who can; one of these birds who could demonstrate a Jenny to the chief of the Air Service and make him think it would outclimb a PW8. But it was certainly not necessary to fake anything with this new J4 job—it sure had everything.

Apparently the two visitors didn't know a whole lot about ships, or else they weren't interested. They didn't fly in it or look it over very closely but were soon in Mills' car, and whirling back to town.

"Better not fly her tonight, Bert. Let the boys put her away, and we'll get into town—I've an idea you'll get all the flying you want in the next few days, anyway."

I looked at Ed out of the corner of my eye, wondering what he was driving at. He knew damned well that I was getting all the flying I wanted every day—six to eight hours of it—sometimes more, but I didn't question Ed much; I knew that he would out with what was on his mind when he got good and ready, and not before. So we drove on into town in Ed's car and he didn't say much till we were nearly in to the main drag.

"Bert, we were doing considerable complaining and grumbling to ourselves a little while ago about the monotony of passenger flying and all flying in general; those men who were out at the field a little while ago bought the new J4 special, and are going out into Colorado on some kind of a wild goose chase and need a pilot. It looks like you are elected, since I haven't any one else I can send, except some short time birds who haven't flown in the altitudes these fellows are planning on going to."

I knew right then that I was to go whether I wanted to or not, and frankly I really didn't care very much about going for several different reasons; in the first place, these non-fliers are usually afraid to do ordinary flying at the start, and then after they've had eight or ten hours of it they are just the opposite—figure then that a ship will do anything from climbing trees to hauling a ton of concrete—and expect some damned unreasonable things from both machine and pilot. But after all, it was their ship—if they wanted to fly in storms and after dark, it would be their doings, and anyway I figured a change would do me good, and I might incidentally learn a little about high finance too—because in my opinion a man who could rush up and buy a ten-thousand dollar airplane in five minutes, without even seeing it fly, must be fairly well equipped as far as a bank account was concerned.

AS SOON as I had changed clothes and had a bite of supper I walked around to the factory, which is only three blocks from my hotel, planning on writing a letter or two before these new employers of mine showed up, but they were there ahead of me, listening to a bunch of conversation Mills was still putting out about the superiority of Air Transit planes over any other.

"Glad to see you, Bert," said Mills; "as Miller told you this evening, Mr. Von Lockum and Mr. Jaquith have purchased the new J4 job, and need a pilot—they want to talk to you about flying for them."

And then he launched in on a long-winded history of my flying experience, some of which was true, but the most of which was as new to me as it was to his two listeners. Mills is like that, talks too much, a fine fellow and all that, but he can have a prospect sold on a ship or a pilot, and then continue to talk so much that his man gets disgusted with him and everything pertaining to aviation in general. But I know Mills and I cut him short on that line right off the bat.

"All right—these men don't give a tinker's damn how far I flew last year, or how many ships I'm supposed to have shot down on the western front—they want a pilot, and if I am the unlucky guy I want to know the details."

I was about half sore at Mills for running off the mouth so much, and besides I didn't like the looks of these strangers any too well to start with; in addition to that, the more I turned the proposition over in my mind, the more certain I was that their game entailed crooked work of some kind. How did I know? I didn't—but I couldn't help feeling that way about it—so I didn't really care whether they hired me for their pilot or not—consequently I made up my mind to set my price good and high so that it would be worth my while to go if they did accept. You see the arrangement I had with the company allowed me to get what I could when off on missions of this kind where I was not flying company ships.

Nothing was said for a minute or two, and then the little foreign looking rooster to whom I had taken a particular dislike, asked in slowly spoken, perfectly rounded English—

"How much, Mr. Weiler, will you charge us for taking this new airplane, and ourselves, to a little camp that we have in Colorado. After we arrive there we shall have some work for you that will require perhaps two weeks—possibly two months—we do not yet know."

"What is the nature of this *work?*" I questioned.

"That, we had rather not tell at present, Mr. Weiler, but I will say that it is in the nature of a test of some aeronautical apparatus which we wish to try at high altitudes—no we cannot test it here,"—this in answer to an attempt of mine to interrupt him.

"You see, we want to test the actual performance of a ship at extremely high altitudes, both with and without this device—it is important that the take off be made from high altitude, in order to prove our appliance. We have a fine camp at an elevation of twelve thousand feet, with ample fuel and supplies. I can assure you that the work will be interesting and not tedious."

He needn't have told me that the work would be interesting—I already knew that it would be damned interesting at an altitude of twelve thousand feet, having done some flying in Colorado before.

"All right, Mr. Von Lockum, since I am not to smuggle opium or liquor across the border, I guess I can accommodate you for about six hundred a month and expenses."

"Fine," exclaimed Von Lockum—"here's five hundred in advance for expense money in case you need anything before we leave—we'll meet you at the field at five in the morning."

Well, you could have knocked me over with a straw—I thought they'd sure let it out when I asked for six hundred a month; maybe I had these fellows stacked up all wrong after all. I've always been too quick to form an opinion of a person—and still I couldn't get the idea out of my head that there was a screw loose some place, so I put the money in my pocket and started away with the thought that I was now either a member of a band of bootleggers, or would be expected to haul Chinamen across the border before many days. Mills knew that I didn't like the outlook, and he slapped me on the back with—

"All right, old man—let us hear from you; I'll phone the boys at the field. The ship will be ready for you before five."

I HIT the old hay pretty early that night, and was at the field the next morning before 4:30. This being a new ship I wanted to give it the once over—see that I had proper rocker clearance, and clean up the fuel traps, because a new tank is more or less apt to contain loose solder and cuttings. I had just finished my work when Von Lockum and Jaquith drove up in a taxi. They were apparently in extra good humor this morning, considering the hour, and I noticed that they had enough baggage to sink a ship. I felt a little differently inclined toward them by now, and did my best to be agreeable—helped them store their baggage away, and had a drink of hot coffee with them out of their thermos.

"First," said Von Lockum, who seemed to be the chief of our little crew, "we'll go to Denver—we have some business there, and while we are attending to that you will have an opportunity to look over the ship somewhat and see how she is standing the trip. You are in full charge, Weiler, and we place absolute confidence in your ability and judgment; we are in no hurry that warrants flying through severe storms, but if possible

we should like to make the trip in one day."

I guess this bird didn't have me sized up very well, or he would have known that I would use my own judgment about flying through storms no matter what his instructions might have been—but all in all I began to like him better, and I could easily see that he was nobody's fool, and that this was not the first airplane he had ever been around. We had hardly more than taken off before he was asleep—an old hand at the game, I remarked to myself—but if that was the case, why had he taken the trouble of bringing me along?

The other bird, I couldn't quite figure. He was not the highly polished and educated type that Von Lockum apparently was; neither did he have the appearance of being entirely devoid of brains. I sized him up as rather a shrewd customer, but one lacking ambition to think and do for himself, only a tool in his partner's hands.

We were now passing over the business section of Wichita—just 5:05 I noticed, and the sun was shining brightly on the ship, but its rays had not yet reached the earth. Hardly a breath of wind, for the smoke and mist lay in the valleys in long serpent-like columns—a beautiful sight and one that has never been and never will be truthfully described by any pen; but a sight, nevertheless that keeps some of us flying when we could probably be doing better at other things. Talk about your spell of the north—that's not a drop in the bucket to this—for once let flying get a grip on you, and you'll be a flier always—I know, because I've tried to break away. But to go on with the tale—

The little J4 purred along beautifully—I kept her throttled back pretty well, and had the mixture thinned down to where she was only burning about eleven gallons an hour—pretty good for a new motor. By 7:30 the wind had come up on our tail, and I kicked her on up to about 3500 to get advantage of it. A few minutes after that, we passed over Sharon Springs, Kansas, and on into Colorado—a very pretty country to fly over, but practically unsettled except for a few scattered ranches.

As a good field presented itself under us at Arriba, Colorado, I let her down and we took on a little gas, although we didn't really need it to get in into Denver; however we had an opportunity to check up on things. Couldn't get anything there but 58 automobile gas, but as we had over half a tank of high test, it did very well—we were flying well throttled anyway, and at that altitude of 4000 feet we got out very nicely—something I was much interested in—because although we had the last word in an airplane, when these birds began talking about running tests from 12,000 feet I surely hoped they would use a little judgment about the kind of a load they expected me to carry.

"KNOW anything about the fields in Denver?" Von Lockum asked before we took off.

"A little," I answered, "had two or three trips there last year."

"Fine. Use the old Humphries field; we don't want to go into Lowry Field at all."

I began to rebuild my suspicions about this chap all over again when he said that—we always go to Lowry—it's a field maintained by an air-service unit of the Colorado National Guard, and we had always been able to obtain high test gas there, since the National Guard boys had used our field in Wichita on their trips east, and had made us feel welcome at their home field but I supposed Von Lockum might know some one at the old Humphries field and wanted to stop there for that reason.

We arrived in Denver at about 11:30, and put our ship in the hangar. My two passengers phoned in for a taxi, and after looking the motor over a little, I too, made ready to go into town.

"You stay here, Weiler—until after dark anyway—and be out early in the morning. No, on second thought, I think you had best stay with the ship all night; I'll arrange to have a cot and your meals sent out to you. If any one gets inquisitive, just tell them that this is your ship, and that you brought some passengers up here who are returning to Wichita tomorrow, see?"

I saw all right—but I saw red—this idea of his didn't appeal to me a damn bit. I have a lot of friends in Denver, and they are not all male friends either; you see, I used to go to school over at Golden and I sure wanted to go to town, but I stayed right there on the field for three days, watching a couple of young fellows rebuilding a crashed Hisso Standard. Very little flying going on around the field, but a little, and it all helped to pass the time to have anything to watch at all. There was no

inquiry about Von Lockum or his partner, Jaquith, or the new Air Transit in the hangar, and I cussed Von Lockum for being so cussed particular and keeping me away from town.

WELL, when they finally did show up they were sure rarin' to go, and it didn't take us long to get away—but before we left, Von Lockum gave me my orders.

"You see, Weiler, since the camp we are going to is not shown on the map, and is not near any settlement—I'll do the navigation—you just fly where I show you."

I guess I am hard to please, but this didn't appeal to me very much either, because I sure like to know where I am going in an airplane—especially in a mountainous country where thunder storms are as sure to come up in the afternoon as anything can be—but I just figured this bird couldn't lose me, and that I could go any place he could, so I agreed.

We started by carrying out a fool idea of his, heading southeast, just as if we were going home—sure made me sore—you'd have thought there was a whole pursuit squadron after us, and watching every move we made; whereas in reality there was nobody in Denver who gave a cuss who we were or where we went, and not a ship there that could catch up with us in two days, with the possible exception of the DH belonging to the regular army instructor over at Lowry—and I happened to know that that bird had sense—he was probably right this minute escorting two or three of Denver's queens around the mountain parks in his car—it's a damn cinch he wasn't bothering his head about a couple of nuts, like I had in the front seat here.

But here we were, and nothing to do but follow the whims of this lunatic who imagined some one in close pursuit; we had burned up twelve or fifteen gallons of good gas before he finally decided it would be safe to venture to turn around. Finally we got headed west and before we had got fairly well squared away it started to rain and hail and blow and raise hell in general; just a summer thunder shower, but a good hard one, and a number of miles through hell with this bird Von Lockum just sitting there as cool as a cucumber and motioning me to go on. Frankly I was panicky, just imagine yourself flying over strange country without a map or any definite knowledge of the altitude of the mountains under you, except that you are damn sure they get higher and higher as you go on—and you go on at more than a hundred miles an hour—expecting every second to fly right into the side of a mountain—and all the time rain—rain so heavy that it is impossible to see a wing tip—rain that stings your face like hail. Boy, it's not fun—if you think so try it. I made up my mind that afternoon, that if I ever got back to the good old plains country, nothing in the way of a storm would be too tough for me. Just that thought that we would butt a mountain any minute added years to my appearance—but it didn't bother my friend Von Lockum, and I finally decided that he must know what he was doing, and believe me now, since it is all over—he did.

Finally the sun came out, and when our navigator didn't change the course I knew that he was either lost or that he knew exactly where he was, which proved to be the case, for we had not flown more than half an hour after leaving the storm until Von Lockum motioned me down for a landing. At first I couldn't imagine where he wanted me to land—the altimeter registered 8500 feet higher than Denver, and I couldn't see anything but mountains, but finally I spied the field—a beautiful natural meadow on top of a great plateau—perhaps a mile in length and from two to six hundred yards wide.

I slipped down and got the wind direction from the tall grass, and flew lengthwise of the field two or three times. I could see that Von Lockum was restless—he wanted me to set her down, since he knew the field was all right (having been there before) but yours truly don't take anybody's judgment on a field, so after I had satisfied myself, I let her down. Believe me, boy, it was soft up there—12,000 feet with three people and baggage even in an Air Transit isn't what it is at sea level by a damn sight.

At first I couldn't see the camp, but when they motioned me to taxi up to the north end of the field, I saw a fairly good sized, but roughly constructed cabin. It nestled in and under the trees so well that it was hard to see until we got nearly to the timber. I also noticed that there were a number of long poles arranged in the fashion of a roof, and covered with pine boughs, to the east of the cabin, and Von Lockum shouted to me, telling me to taxi

in there. We certainly had everything all shipshape here—hangar and all, and suddenly it ran through my mind that this was all done for purpose of concealment—even I had not seen anything to indicate that any one might live here until after we had landed. Whatever these men had on their minds, they surely believed in being secretive about it. Here we were, some hour and a half out of Denver, which must mean at least a hundred and fifty miles, evidently right on the divide and miles from any settlement, with these birds still trying to hide out—whatever their game, I determined to find out what it was—it must be for big stakes.

THE cook, whom Von Lockum called Joe, had dinner ready for us in short order, and we did full justice to it; Von Lockum especially, who seemed to be in extra good spirits tonight, probably partly due to a bottle that he had managed to find soon after our arrival. Finally he opened up, and began to outline our work to me.

"Weiler, you undoubtedly think it strange that we took all the trouble to come way up here in the mountains—but as I told you in Wichita, we want to test our apparatus in this altitude. The new device that we are to test is an invention of mine and consists of an automatic variable pitch propeller, or more correctly, airscrew. You know that the ordinary airscrew in use today is merely a compromise between an efficient blade for maximum climb and an efficient one for economical cruising—in other words the average airscrew puts the airplane in the same class as a motor car without the conventional three-speed transmission. In that case the gear ratio of the car would have to be low enough to allow the machine to climb fairly steep hills, and at the same time not so low as to cause the motor to race on level ground, with the result that the car would neither run fast, as our modern cars do in high gear—nor climb an exceedingly steep hill as they do in low. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I answered—"it is a well-known fact that there is a real need for a variable airscrew—but excessive weight and complicated manual control mechanism have always made them impractical, as I understand it."

Von Lockum laughed—"wait until tomorrow; my airscrew weighs but thirty pounds more than the Dural prop on the ship we flew in here, and the only manual control is a small lever that holds the pitch any place you want it. You see the pitch increases with the motor speed—all you have to do is to dive and get excessive speed, then lock the pitch; when you level off the motor slows way down, but you cruise along at a high rate of speed due to the high pitch. The reverse is true in a climb—simply idle down and get a very low pitch angle—lock it, and when you open up your motor turns up away above normal—and climb—well you be the judge. I want you to do the flying just as I tell you—I'll ride in front and test the climb and speed under different conditions."

This was all very interesting to me, as I had seen a few variable airscrews myself. Frankly I thought that Von Lockum had a pretty high opinion of himself and his propeller, but the morning would tell, and I was soon in my bunk, censoring myself for having so quickly judged this man, who was after all, probably only one of these inventive cranks. Anyway, inventors and engineers always did look ninety per cent goofy to me.

After breakfast the next morning, when I went out to the ship, Jaquith was helping the chief unbox the new prop—and it certainly was a beauty as far as workmanship was concerned. Cast Dural hub, with steel sleeves which were the roots for Dural blades, which seemed to work in a sort of worm.

Well, during the day we ran tests on the ship with the regular standard prop. Rate of climb tests—absolute ceiling—high speed at ground level—high speed at maximum elevation, etc. It was nearly evening when he had finished, and completed all the data, but Von Lockum was anxious to try out the new prop, so we put it on and I took it out and ran it on the ground wide open for as long as I dared, without overheating the motor. It seemed to balance nicely—even better than the standard prop, I imagined.

"Get in," I yelled to Von Lockum, as I removed the wheel blocks

"No, you go ahead alone—I want to watch the climb from the ground," he answered.

And now I didn't have to wonder any more why he had taken the pains to bring me along with him.

"So that's the game, eh?" I muttered, half to myself—but as the prop looked all right and had stood some fast turning on the ground, I adjusted the pitch to a very low angle and gave her the gun. I have never had such a surprise in my life as I got then. The motor turned up about nineteen fifty and according to the watch and altimeter, the climb surpassed the climb at Witchita. I could understand then why my employer valued this prop so highly—it sure had the goods. Well, I climbed her up about four thousand feet and leveled off to try the high pitch for cruising. After releasing the pitch lock, I eased ahead on the stick to gain a little speed, when *crash*—it seemed to me that the motor would sure come out before I could cut the switches. I decided right there that six hundred a month wasn't enough—but finally the prop stopped revolving, as did the sickening vibration, and the ship still seemed to be all in one piece. I slipped her down into the field, and Old Von came running out to where I stopped rolling.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

I explained just what had happened, and he seemed terribly puzzled.

Just then Jaquith came running up to the ship—

"I told you," he said to Von Lockum, "he's still fooling us, I wish I hadn't ever put my money into the —"

"Shut up, you damn fool," Von Lockum answered him, with a glance at me to see if I had heard, and then apparently satisfied that I hadn't he turned to me.

"I'm surely sorry, Mr. Weiler—it's only a matter of adjustment—I assure you that this will never happed again. Tomorrow we will have it all fixed up, then we can continue with our tests."

BUT Jaquith's remark had set me thinking—who could he have meant when he said: "He's still fooling us"—surely not me, for they had been standing right there on the field watching the whole thing—and then too I could see that the little foreigner resented the fact that I had overheard the remark made by his partner. It was too deep for me, but I couldn't get the matter off my mind, and decided to keep my eyes open, and to do a little investigating of my own when the opportunity presented itself. I knew I would have to be careful about it, since Jaquith, Von Lockum, or the cook, Joe, seemed to follow me every time I turned around. Consequently I had no opportunity to do anything for some time—and each day they would mount the prop on the ship—I'd take her up—and the same thing would happen every time I'd try to change the pitch. One blade would hold a high angle—the other would assume a low one—causing the worst vibration I've ever experienced in an airplane. I decided then and there, that if I ever got back to civilization, I would write a letter to the builders of the motor, telling them that they needn't ever worry about breaking any crankshafts in their J4 model—and that I'd buy a carload of cigars for the welders down at the factory. It sure looked to me as if every weld ought to come apart every time that prop let loose on one of its rampages.

Finally, Von Lockum seemed to lose his temper, and when they took the prop off that time he and Jaquith and the cook all started carrying it off to what they called the shop. Apparently they had forgotten me and were thinking only of their troubles. I decided that this was my one chance and made every minute count. I followed them as closely as I could without being observed. They followed a clear cut path that led off north from the cabin—and in a short time they went into a shack and disappeared from view—but that was all I wanted to know—I was now sure that I could find the place any time, so I made haste to retrace my steps, as I had had an idea in mind for some time that I could get a line on Von Lockum if I could only get an opportunity to go through a little black bag of his. I found the bag all right, and was about to give up hopes of finding any letters or anything that would help me. I looked through one of the cracks in the cabin and could see Jaquith coming back. I had seen that there was a newspaper on the bottom of the bag, but I thought it had been placed there more for a protection to the articles in the bag than for any other reason. I don't know what possessed me to take it, but I did—perhaps it was because I had not seen a paper since our arrival here—but anyway I hurriedly folded the paper away and stuffed it in my coat. I had no sooner done so than Jaquith appeared in the door—perhaps I felt guilty, but I imagined that he eyed me through and through, as if he was

suspicious of me. I tried to look as unconcerned as possible, and sauntered over to where he was.

"Where have you been?" he questioned me.

"Why?" I asked him! "Afraid I'll run off?" He made me sore when he asked where I had been. "I hired out here as a pilot, and I think I've been earning every cent of my money—didn't know I had to account to you for every second of my spare time—if that's the case you can get somebody else in my place just any time."

"Oh no—I didn't mean it that way at all." I could see that I had waylaid any suspicions he might have had. "We have enemies, you know, Weiler, and I was afraid for the moment that they might have been here."

"Well, you don't need to worry about me," I answered, "guess I can take care of myself—besides, any one coming here would have to come in a balloon, and anyway, anybody who would want that propeller you birds have here ought to have his head examined—if that is a propeller, I don't know anything about flying. Give me an umbrella and a canoe, and I can fly across the Pacific, if that's a propeller."

Jaquith didn't have anything else to say, and went on out to the hangar. Even though I hadn't found anything of interest in Von Lockum's bag, I now knew where the shop was, and was confident that I would learn something of interest as soon as I could get to it.

I WALKED down to the little stream that ran by the lower end of the field. I often went down there to rest, and they had never molested me, so I felt that I could read my paper in seclusion. I was much disappointed to find that it was a copy of a paper now over a month old—a paper printed in Terre Haute, Indiana—and I was about to throw it down in disgust, when something caught my eye that made me sit up and take notice. This is what I read—

NO TRACE OF PROF. DOUGLAS OR HIS PROPELLER

Prof. Glenn L. Douglas of this city, the eminent physicist and inventor of the new variable pitch airscrew for airplanes, whose disappearance last Thursday has caused a nation-wide search to be instituted for him, has not been heard from, nor do the authorities have any new clews to work on. Following the theft of his propeller some two months ago, Prof. Douglas disappeared as completely as if the earth had swallowed him up. He was to have demonstrated the propeller to the Government the first of the month, and it has been rumored unofficially that air service officials fear that he has met with foul play at the hands of the representatives of some foreign government, who are attempting to reap the great many advantages claimed for this new device. Prof. Douglas' wife and daughter hold out every hope that he will be found at an early date, but with so many of the government's best secret service men on the trail, it seems strange that no trace of him has been found, up to this time.

I read and reread the article. Without a doubt I had been flying Professor's invention every day for the past week. I must get action at once—but how to best accomplish it? Fortunately I had an opportunity that very night, and this is how it happened.

After supper the three of them all got pretty well lit up and asked me to join them in a game of poker. I saw my opportunity there, and made the most of it. Every time I got the chance, I pretended to take a drink, and of course the bottle went the rounds—it wasn't long before the whole crew was drunk and dead to the world in sleep. I'll tell you right now that it didn't take me long to get up to that shop—but upon my arrival there, I didn't know what plan of action to take. Would I find another member of their gang there? Surely they would have a guard—they had taken every precaution in other ways, and I could not think that they would overlook this—so I approached the door of the shack very cautiously making as little noise as possible, and expecting to be challenged or shot at any minute. I was much surprised to find the door ajar, and the place apparently deserted. I know that I made quite a noise when I bumped up against the prop, which was on the floor—and then I heard something move, over in the far side of the room.

"DON'T torture me any more, Von Lockum—I can't stand it—I can tell you the truth—no more. If you would only let me have a chance to adjust the blades on the motor, I could eliminate the trouble in a little while—I can only tell you the truth, I—"

"What is the truth?" I questioned. "This is not Von Lockum, but the pilot, Weiler."

"It's all the same, I suppose—they all torture me until I think I cannot stand it another minute. I suppose you have some new method. I wish I could appeal to you to tell Von Lockum that I can't—"

"There, there, old chap," I said—"I am a friend—I happened to see about the whole thing in an old paper that I found down in the cabin this afternoon. We are going to put an end to this torture business for all time."

While I was cutting the ropes that they had the professor tied down to his bunk with, he told me how he happened to be there.

It seems that after stealing the prop from him in Terre Haute, Von Lockum had made an effort to test the properties of the device on an old war time L. V. G. Having met with no success at all, due to the fact that the mechanism was not correctly adjusted, he had set a trap for Douglas by running a blind ad in some of the papers, giving a fictitious name and claiming to have found the airscrew on a highway near Colorado Springs. In the end the professor had been induced to call in person for the propeller, in Denver—only to be bundled into the old L. V. G. and brought here to the camp.

"Well, I'll be damned," I exclaimed—"I thought all such methods were a thing of the past in this country, long ago."

"So did I," answered the professor, "but here we are, and with no chance in the world to get away—unless you can persuade Von Lockum to—"

"I can persuade Von Lockum, all right," I answered, "but not in the way you mean. Look here, Douglas, snap into it now and get that prop of yours disassembled if you want to take it home with you. I've never stolen an airplane, but we are going to steal one tonight, and no mistake—but be quick about it."

Well, to make a long story short, I went back to the cabin and tied those three drunks up so that I'll bet they had one hell of a time getting loose when they did sober up. If I was a real author and writing a "story book" tale that wasn't true, I guess I'd have to have a big fight at this stage of the game, and make a real hero out of myself, but as it really happened, it was just like taking candy from a baby, to tie those birds up; incidentally, I had a lot of fun doing it, because I sure had a real dislike for all of them. I soon had the ship all gassed up, and had the standard Dural prop and spinner back on the ship. By that time, Prof. Douglas came dragging the blades of his prop into the hangar, and then we both went back after the hub.

"Where is the old L. V. G.?" I asked Professor Douglas.

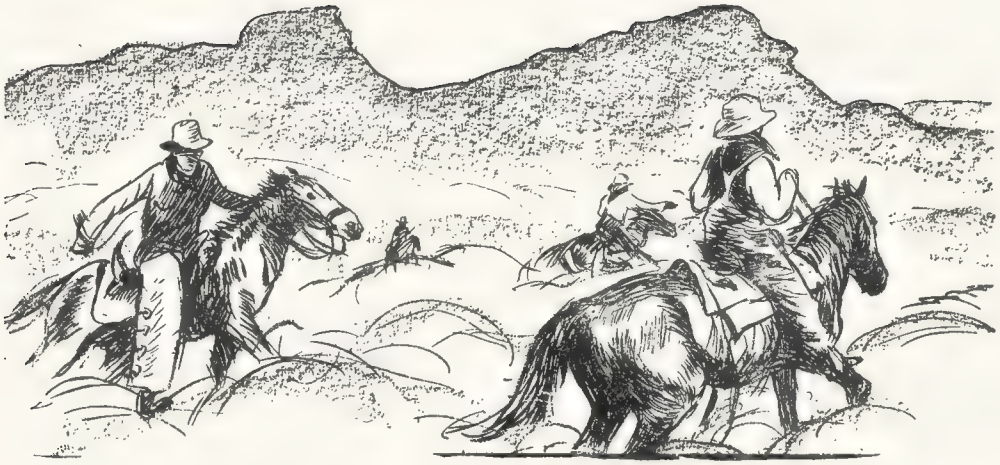
"They must have cracked it up near Wichita—I heard them talking about it the other night. They left here in it to go to Kansas City for some special tools, and when they returned they had me change the front of the hub so they could mount a regular J4 hub into it. The old ship carried a 220 Benz, with a foreign hub of some kind."

IT WAS just getting daylight when we took off over the trees at the south end of the field. I threw a circle there, and we came back over the cabin at a very low altitude. Gave a big zoom there, and I chuckled to think of what Von Lockum must be thinking if the noise had waked him up. Perhaps he thought we were the advance guard of the pursuit squadron he always imagined was after him—anyway I hoped he was awake.

We flew east for some distance before we came to a railroad, and after following it south for a ways, we picked up the town of Ft. Collins, so that I figure we must have been some place between North Park and Estes Park but perhaps farther west. Personally, I don't care where it was—I never intend to go back.

I took the professor on home to Terre Haute before coming back to Wichita. That was all three months ago now, and today I had a letter from him, saying that he had the prop all adjusted and perfected—wanted me to take the job as test pilot. Well, the prof. is a fine fellow and all that sort of thing—and he may even have his outfit all adjusted properly—but some other pilot is welcome to the job just the same. Anyway, I have long since hung out my shingle—*Bert Weiler, Airplane transportation to any Point.*

Why shouldn't I?—I have a new J4 Air Transit special, which I don't think Von Lockum would have the guts to claim if he does live to be old enough to walk down out of the mountains. It's a cinch he'll have to walk if he does get down—but then, that's his business.



WAR A*long*

A Complete Novelette of the West

CHAPTER I

THE JOVIAL ONE

HE PUSHED open the swinging doors of the saloon with a good deal of unnecessary force, and as he came into the barroom he fixed the proprietor with a wide, good-humored smile. Tom Simmons smiled back. Tom Simmons usually was inclined to sullenness, but he knew how to unbend to a man who acted as if he were about to spend freely. Tom Simmons knew that a noisy entrance into his barroom of a grinning man meant that the man was about to liquor up.

This man lost no time. He strode up to the bar, his spurs clanking on the bare floor, and as he leaned his chest against the rail he pushed back his broad-brimmed hat. Tom Simmons, having conducted this saloon for a dozen years or more, had served many men. He believed he was a judge of men. He was, in a way; but like everybody else he made his miscalculations. He decided that this man was not jovial by nature. His joviality, Simmons believed, came from the fact that he had long been without a drink, liked a drink, and was now going to have it. That the man's brain harbored a sinister design never occurred to Tom Simmons.

"My tongue is swelled, my mouth is hot and dry," the stranger announced. "I am dusty inside, outside, and from here to yonder. I have tried water and have found it good to wash in. How about a bottle of pop?"

He placed five dollars on the bar. Tom Simmons spun a glass toward him and pushed forward a bottle which he took from the back bar. The stranger filled the glass to the brim and tossed it off. The hand which put the glass on the bar did not pause for rest. It moved forward to the bottle, and again the glass was brimmed. Again the stranger tossed off the drink. He had now four ounces of strong whisky under his belt. The liquor touched him up rather fast, Tom Simmons decided. He grasped the bar rail and pushed himself away from it and pulled himself back, swaying a little from side to side meanwhile. His eyes glowed and his grin split his lips.

"Not much doin' in your place of business this bright an' sunny mornin'," he said.

"Too early," said Simmons. "The stage will be in this afternoon, and tonight the

Big Creek

By Charles Wesley Sanders

Lazy M and the Two-Bar-Two outfits will likely be over. It'll be lively enough. Stayin'?"

"Ridin'," the stranger answered. He poured himself another drink, and he did not pour it to look at. "My name," he announced, "is Ridenour, an' I can ride a week. I been workin' for the Lazy M outfit my own self. I been over there for a month, an' I just got my pay."

"You stuck it out a long time," Simmons said dryly. "It must 'a' seemed a long time."

"Time goes fast when there is somethin' doin'," Ridenour declared, and while he let that sink in, he took another drink.

SIMMONS saw that he was considerably drunk now. Probably, thought Simmons, he had had no breakfast, and the liquor was boiling in an empty stomach. Simmons, as it happened, had had something on his own mind for several weeks. Luke Sharp, owner of the Two-Bar-Two, had called Simmons to account, and he had been rough about it. Ordering Simmons to sell no more drinks to one Curly Randall, a puncher who could not handle his liquor, he had added that he had it in his mind to clean out Simmons' place for some little time. Simmons had said nothing. Sharp stood six feet one in his socks, and he was built proportionately. Simmons was five feet seven, and paunchy. There was no chance for argument. But Simmons had harbored resentment. Here was a man who had worked for the Lazy M, the first outfit beyond the Two-Bar-Two. Simmons was hungry for news of that section, the stranger was pretty drunk, and he was talkative. There was somethin' doin', was there?

"Have another drink on the house," Simmons invited.

"Which is a gent's talk," Ridenour returned, pouring the drink, "though yuh don't need to think that I can't buy my own drinks. In addition to that five, I have got ninety-eight dollars on me. What yuh think of that?"

"A hundred and three dollars is considerable money to make in a month," Simmons said.

"And you don't think I done it?" Ridenour asked.

The hand with which Simmons mopped the bar shook a little. For a fact there seemed to have been somethin' doin'

through Big Creek valley. Simmons managed a smile, though his thick lips were tremulous.

"Tilden must have raised wages a considerable," he said.

"Now, don't kid me," Ridenour said, wagging his head in drunken fashion. "Y'know your own self you couldn't dig more'n forty a month out of Tilden or Sharp if you was to work twenty-nine hours a day."

"I on'y heard what you said," Simmons stated.

Ridenour looked toward the door, toward the end of the room. He surveyed the part behind him in the speckled glass. Then he leaned to Simmons. Simmons bent forward, his eyes glistening, his tongue gliding over his lips.

"Less have another drink," said Ridenour. "You an' me together. On me!"

He pushed himself back from the bar, raised his head, and burst into laughter. Simmons smiled and pushed the bottle down the bar. Simmons could take his time. What Ridenour had already drunk had loosened his tongue. A few more drinks would loosen it further. Yeah, Simmons could patiently wait. Before this he had often waited. They drank together.

"One thing is nice," Ridenour said. "A man can get so drunk he can't walk, but he never gets so drunk he can't ride. Ain' that right, friend o' mine?"

"You boys can always stay on a hawse," Simmons conceded.

"An' me," said Ridenour, "I can stay on a hawse better'n most, better'n anybody. Ain' that a fac'?"

"It sure is!"

RIDENOUR seemed now to be supporting himself by clinging to the bar rail. Simmons considered offering him another drink but decided to wait a while. Ridenour might buy the drink himself and he might not need another. A drink saved was a drink saved.

Ridenour seemed to lose himself for a while. With his eyes half-lidded he stared into the mirror. Then he looked up and down the bar. At last his eyes came back to Simmons' face. For a space he seemed not to remember who Simmons was. Then the light of recognition dawned in his dazed eyes, and he laughed.

"Less have another drink," he said.

They drank. Ridenour wiped his lips with the back of his hand. He leaned to Simmons.

"Keep a secret?" he asked.

"Secrets," said Simmons, "is bad business. Have another drink."

He was sure one more drink would make Ridenour babble. Ridenour, however, seemed to develop an unexpected dignity.

"You're tryin' to get me drunk, Simmy," he said. "Unkind of yuh, very! I was goin' to tell yuh somethin', but now I won't do it."

"I was just tryin' to be sociable," Simmons explained. "This is the best Bourbon licker ever you set your lips to. I don't serve it to everybody."

"Oh, are yuh an' me drinkin' out of your private bottle, Simmy, ol' maverick?" Ridenour exclaimed. "Well, less h'ist one, then."

They h'isted one apiece, and then Ridenour began to laugh. It was silly, immoderate laughter, and laughter of a man thoroughly drunk.

"Maverick!" he cried, through the tears which the laughter brought to his eyes. "Say, Simmy, a man can use other things besides mavericks to make his herd biggern' it was before. Eh, Simmy, li'l calf?"

"Corralin' calves is bad business," Simmons stated.

"Is it? Well, well, an' what do yuh think of bonuses? Are they bad business, too? Besides what yuh goin' to do when a mother cow—poor, li'l mother cow! is lyin' dead, hid away from all the world with a bullet in her carcass? Ain't it a act of mercy to give the calf a home, Simmy, yuh white-faced steer?"

Simmy didn't know what to say. He wanted to lead Ridenour on to something more definite. Yet he hesitated to prompt him. Drunken men, as Simmons well knew, might talk the more when they were prompted or they might dry up and refuse to utter a word. So Simmons passed the bottle again.

Ridenour ignored it now. He folded his arms and rested them on the bar rail. The flush of displeasure was in his cheeks. There was also a displeased look in his eyes.

"Mebbe yuh think I didn't get a bonus," he said. "Mebbe yuh think I was the only one that got a bonus. Hell, Simmy, your head is all fat. Where'd you think I got the money I got? Yuh think, Tilden ain'

better off than he was when I went to work for him. Yuh don't know nothin', Simmy."

"I wouldn't think," said Simmons boldly, "that Tilden would stoop to pay a bonus for Sharp's calves."

"Did I say that anything like that happened?" Ridenour asked. "I didn't say nothin' of the kind."

"Dead cows with the Two-Bar-Two brand on 'em," said Simmons half to himself. "That don't seem possible. Where could a fella pile up a bunch of dead cows?"

"Wha's use of tellin' you nothin'?" Ridenour sneered. "You can't ride hawse. You don't never stir out this barroom. You keep yourself shut up here away from the light an' the air. No wonder you are fat an' gray around the gills. Well, I must be ridin'. Less see." He straightened up, and though he swayed a little, he seemed to have fairly good command of himself.

"Yes, Simmy," he said, "I reckon I could take another little drink. We will have one together, on me. Then I will be ridin'. Fill up your glass, Simmy, ol' bronc. Drink to me. You won't never see me again, Simmy. I am travelin' south, far, far away."

Simmy could drink most men under the table, and so he had no hesitation to drink again with Ridenour.

As Ridenour put down his glass, he glared at Simmons.

"Yuh think it couldn't be done?" he asked. "Huh, if yuh had a hawse and was to ride down Big Creek for twenty-five miles, yuh would come to a box canyon. Don't many people know it is there. Growed over with trees and vines. But *I* know it's there— Took me three days to find it. If there is any hide left on them cows, yuh could find the Two-Bar-Two brand. But yuh ain't goin' lookin' for it. Simmy, yuh ol' coyote. Yuh couldn't ride twenty-five miles in twenty-five years. Well, so long, Simmy. I'm goin' to hit it. I have lingered too long, much too long."

HE TURNED abruptly from the bar and started toward the door. To reach the door he came about in a half circle, but he reached it. Simmons was back of the door, holding it slightly open, as Ridenour walked across the unroofed porch to his horse. Ridenour swayed drunkenly as he untied the horse, and he had to hop three times before he made the saddle. Up there, however, he seemed to be quite himself. He wheeled the animal and sent him scampering down the dusty road.

A third of a mile away he came to a bend in the road. He brought the horse down and let him take his time. He was upright in the saddle, and the dazed look was gone from his eyes.

"A hundred dollars besides what I told Simmy about," he said to himself softly. "Not so bad. Not at all bad."

He rode on into the south and passed out of the country, which never knew him again.

By then Simmons was back of the bar again. His eyes were on the door. He was waiting for somebody to come in so that he could send word over to Sharp. He chuckled as he thought of how Sharp would receive his message. Sharp would think Simmons was trying to placate him.

"Hell," said Simmons to himself, "in a war between them two outfits, the Lazy M would wipe the Two-Bar-Two off the map."

Simmons was a man who did not forget or forgive an insult. He would almost have given his fat right arm to see Sharp's outfit wiped out.

It was after noon before an unattached puncher, who was glad to pick up five dollars, set out from Simmons' for the Two-Bar-Two. He bore a message from Simmons to Luke Sharp.

CHAPTER II

DIGNITY

LUKE SHARP was seated on the edge of a rough board table in the middle of the bunkhouse. Eight men, his punchers, stood beyond him. Sharp's face was habitually grave, but now it was graver than usual. The men knew that he had something on his mind, and they eyed him in silence.

He was a man of fifty—this Luke Sharp—but age sat lightly on him. His dark hair had no more than a suggestion of gray in it. His face was weather-bitten, but age had not accentuated those wrinkles. His dark eyes were bright and clear.

Here in the middle of the decade of the eighties Sharp was an established figure in the cattle country. He had been here for

twenty years ever since the close of the Civil War, in which he had served with distinction. He was thought to be a cold man but he was known to be an honest one, in a time when a man, otherwise accounted for, was considered honest if he attended strictly to his own business. There was no particular bond of affection between Sharp and his men, but they respected him. They would have followed him wherever he was willing to lead.

Sharp hadn't so many cattle that he didn't know what to do, but he had a great many. Heretofore those cattle had roamed unmolested. The waters of Big Creek were controlled by Sharp and Tilden, and the flats and the hills upon which those cattle fed stretched far away. For a number of years Sharp and Tilden had got along together without trouble. Then they had had a break. The mind of each man was poisoned against the other.

So Sharp had been ready to believe the word which Simmons had sent to him. There had been a hasty round-up of his men. He was going to tell them what had happened.

"Men," he said, "we have got trouble on our hands. Some of our cows have been killed. Their calves have been stolen. It is Tilden's work."

Nobody showed any particular surprise. Of course it was Tilden's work. Why, that Tilden outfit would stoop to anything! For the trouble between Sharp and Tilden had spread to the respective outfits as it generally did.

That trouble between Tilden and Sharp had been over Curly Randall, too. Curly Randall was as likable a fellow as ever hit the cow country. He was a dark-haired youngster with jet black curling hair. Though he was a top hand, he never bragged. He was good-humored and efficient, but as weak as the liquor which often got the best of him was strong. Sharp was fond of him, and he had spent a good deal of time talking to Curly. Curly had promised and had smiled when he had given the promise.

ONE Saturday night he failed to come back to the Two-Bar-Two. Through Sunday he was still missing. Sharp rode in to find him. He found him—found him drinking with Tilden. Tilden was entirely innocent. He had happened into Simmons' place and had found Curly there. Curly needed a drink, and Tilden had been buying it when Sharp had strode in.

Sharp had ordered Curly home. Curly meekly started for the door. Sharp said nothing to Tilden just then. He simply stood and looked at the other cattleman, but there was more in that look than there would have been in a long speech. Tilden stared back in astonishment for a moment, and then his anger flared up.

"Any time you want to back that up," he said, "you know where to find me."

"Ride wide when we meet," said Sharp and abruptly left the place.

So the feud began. That there was no real reason why it should have begun at all made no difference. The feeling between Tilden and Sharp grew in intensity. They did not speak when they met. There was watchfulness in their bearing and in their hostile eyes. The men in the two outfits were not so self-contained. The sight of a rider of one outfit was enough to throw a rider of the other outfit into spasms of mirth. Remarks were made but never directly. If anyone else was there to hear, the remarks were made to him. If no one was there, the remarks were tossed on the air.

As yet there had been no actual encounter, but both outfits knew that one might come at any moment. The levity would give way to fierce anger. Guns would come into play. What the end of that would be no one could even guess, but no one cared particularly. The war was on. Let it be fought to a finish, no matter what the finish was.

"How far the thing has gone, generally speaking, I don't know," Sharp now went on. "A man who has been ridin' for Tilden got drunk in Simmons' place this mornin'. He spilled himself. He had two months and a half pay on him, and he had been workin' for Tilden for a month. Nobody ever accused Tilden of throwin' his money away. Tilden ain't payin' mor'n sixty dollars for a few calves neither. A coupla hundred steers would be more like it. That's what we got to find out about.

"First I am sendin' a couple men down the creek to see if it is true that a bunch of dead cows is lyin' in a canyon there. If they are, we have got somethin' to work on. Randall, you take Pete Sadler and go on

over there. Now, you got a job on your hands, Curly. I want you to do it up proper. You get ready and I will tell you just where to go, far as I know. I want you to do some ridin' an' get back here. We are all goin' to town tonight."

Curly and Sadler followed him outside. The six other men displayed at once an intense interest in their personal belongings. They picked out the best they had to wear that night. A few fancy vests which had not been worn in a long time were dug up. Bright neckerchiefs were tenderly laid out. Whoever had a pair of new boots put them on. Old boots were rubbed up. Particular attention was given to the guns. They were made ready for action, fast action.

When Curly and Sadler came back, in the afternoon, the six were a very presentable group. They were washed and shaved and combed. They looked more as if they had prepared for a wedding than a possible funeral, except that they were too grave for festivities.

Curly's report was brief and confirmatory. A dozen cows lay up in that box canyon, dead for some time. Their calves were, of course, gone.

"All right," Sharp said. "Supper will be early. We will ride right after supper."

He withdrew to the house. Randall and Sadler, after one look at the other men, began to scrub and shave and comb. Curly was by way of being a dude when he sallied forth, and he shone resplendent when he was done. Ordinarily he would have been derided, but now no one offered any comment.

SHARP sat for an hour by himself in the living-room of the ranch house. On reflection he was dogged if he could figure this thing out. Of course he had had a row with Tilden, but it didn't seem as if Tilden would stoop this low. There were only two explanations. One was that Tilden had been rustling Sharp's steers as well as killing some of his cows and stealing the calves. The other explanation was that Tilden was out for revenge, and had taken the revenge in this mean and sneaking way. To gratify his revenge he might throw his money away.

And yet that didn't seem altogether like Tilden. Why, he had always proved himself a man. He and Sharp had been in the same company in the war. Tilden had never shown the white feather there. Sharp could remember, as if it were yesterday, experiences he and Tilden had had together. They had suffered and fought side by side.

But Sharp was a man who dealt with facts as they presented themselves. One big fact in this situation was that some of his cows had been killed and their calves taken away. That drunken puncher had said that Tilden was responsible. Sharp would find out about it.

"Now," he said when the outfit was ready to start for town, "you boys are going to be on your dignity. You are goin' to have nothin' to say. Keep your eyes and your ears open. And no drinkin'. That goes double for you, Curly Randall."

"I don't need no drink," Curly Randall said. "I have seen what you fellas haven't seen, and it has made my blood boil."

They were silent as they rode into the town. They looked neither to the right nor to the left as they made their way to Simmons' place. They dismounted and tied their ponies without a word to each other or to the horses. Then, led by Sharp, they entered the saloon.

Night had fallen as they had wound their way from the ranch to the village. In the saloon the hanging lamp was lighted. Simmons stood behind the bar. His face blanched a little as he looked at the file of men. He nervously polished glasses and then wiped the bar. Catching Curly Randall's eye, he lifted his own eyebrows and nodded slightly, a glass in his hand. Curly only shook his head coldly.

Simmons had a moment of regret. As an ignorant man will do, he seemed to have started something whose finish he could not foresee. There was something deadly in the manner of this Two-Bar-Two outfit. They weren't drinking anything. That didn't look so good.

In the rear of the room there were two poker tables and faro layout. A man sat at each of the tables and one stood behind the faro layout. As the Two-Bar-Two men had come in, these had straightened up. They were Simmons' house players and they expected immediate business.

But there was no immediate business. Sharp took up his place with his back to the wall, so that he could command a view of the door. His men stood beyond him,

separated, so that they would have room for whatever they had to do. Sharp knew that it would not be long before the Lazy M men began coming in.

There was presently a dull thud of hoofs on the dirt road outside. There was a noisy arrival at the hitching rack. Then half a dozen men burst into the room. They came in one close behind the other, and they headed as one for the bar. They were halfway there when they caught sight of Sharp and the men beyond him.

Instantly the Lazy M men stopped. For a full minute perhaps there was a deathlike silence in the room. The Lazy M men seemed to be arrested, held in check, by what they saw in the faces of the other men. Simmons appeared to have a palpitant moment during which his fear was for his property. Any minute, guns might pop. When it was all over, Simmons' place might be a wreck.

"All up," he called, and he was surprised at the thin quality of his voice. "On the house."

The Lazy M men had been puzzled. They had not known just what to do or how to act. Simmons' invitation broke the tension. They had come to town to get a few drinks. If they could have the first on the house, so much the better. They trooped to the bar.

SIMMONS set out a bottle and spun glasses down the bar. The men filled the glasses to the brim, and they did not at once lift them to their lips. At the end of the bar was old Anson, Tilden's foreman. Anson was absolutely loyal to Tilden, and he had of course known that trouble was brewing between the two outfits. He had felt an insult in the manner of Sharp and Sharp's men, and he was not one to accept an insult calmly.

He slowly turned away from the bar, but he did not look at Sharp. He seemed to think that he could insult Sharp, in his turn, by ignoring Sharp. He fixed his attention on Randall.

"What's the matter with your thirst, Randall?" he asked. "Why ain't yuh steppin' up? Are yuh afraid yuh wouldn't know how to take a drink with some real gents?"

Swift as light Curly Randall stepped forth, sober, clothed in his right mind here where he had so often befuddled himself, handsome, cool now, even debonair. In its holster his gun hung, oiled, loaded, ready for instant use. Curly's hand was above the butt; the hand was pressed lightly against his side.

"The only real gents here ain't drinkin' tonight," he stated softly.

The ensuing silence was broken by the simultaneous scraping of three chairs as the gamblers got to their feet and retreated to the rear of the room.

"Drink her up, boys," came Simmons' voice. "It's the finest Bourbon yuh ever put your lips to."

But neither Anson nor Curly Randall paid any attention to this. Death lay between them, and they knew it. So neither permitted his eyes to leave the face of the other for an instant. Each was looking for a sign of the other's intention. If one went for his gun no fraction of a second would pass till the other followed suit.

And yet they hesitated. To suspect one another, to have a row, even to pass an insult was one thing; to draw a gun and kill a man or be killed was quite another. They were law-abiding men for the most part, hard-working men.

Sharp relieved the tension. Sharp had seen nearly four years of war. He had learned to keep his head in perilous situations. Also toward the end of the war he had been clothed with authority. He had become used to handling men then, and he had handled them ever since then. He took a forward step. His spurs made a faint, metallic sound in the silence.

"Where's your boss, Anson?" he asked coldly.

The fight, for the moment, was over between Curly Randall and Anson. Both men knew it. Anson was permitted to turn his attention to Sharp in utter safety, unless these men of the Two-Bar-Two were of a lower order than the order of skunks. Curly would not dare to take advantage of the diversion which Sharp had created. That would be murder. Therefore Anson turned easily to Sharp.

"Who wants to know?" he asked.

"I do," said Sharp.

"Well, I ain't much given to peddlin' information," Anson said, pushing back his hat, "and still we ain't got nothin' to conceal. The boss is down to the store makin' a few purchases. I expect he will be here any minute now. The crowd will then be enlarged by one more gent."

"We will wait," said Sharp quietly.

"In the meantime have you any objection to us fellas takin' this here drink which is on the house?" Anson asked.

Sharp made no retort. He merely stood looking at the grizzled foreman. As if he had won a victory Anson turned his back on all of them, lifted his glass, balanced it for a moment with a steady hand, and then shot the liquor from lips to stomach in one gulp. The other men followed suit.

"You can fill 'em up again on me, Simmons," Anson said.

The bottle was still on the bar and Anson filled his glass. He pushed the bottle along to the next man and it traveled till the last Lazy M man had a brimming glass in front of him. They folded their arms on the rail and considered the liquor.

SIMMONS nodded to one of the gamblers in the rear of the room, and that worthy came up behind the bar. Simmons left the bar and walked over to one of the chairs and sat down. He waited till the Lazy M men lifted their glasses. Then he sidled up to Sharp. He was about to speak to the cattleman when he looked at Anson. Anson had lifted his glass all right, but he had not put it to his lips. He was observing Simmons by means of the mirror. As Simmons hesitated, Anson put down the glass and turned and leaned his broad shoulders against the rail. Every Lazy M man followed suit. There they stood, apparently lounging, but in reality closely observing Simmons. Simmons faltered and then, with a weak smile, he started to return to his place behind the bar.

"Simmons!"

It was Sharp's voice, cold, harsh, commanding. Simmons wheeled.

"There's nothin' you can say to me," Sharp said. "Keep away from me."

He was perfectly at liberty to accept a warning from Simmons, but Simmons need not think that there had been established between them any confidential relationship. Sharp hadn't been fooled by Simmons. He didn't know just why Simmons had sent the message to him, but he knew that the saloon keeper had an ax of his own to grind. The thing to do was to keep Simmons at his distance.

"Oh, no. No, no." Simmons was hasty for once. "I wasn't thinkin' of sayin' anything, Mr. Sharp."

"I wonder," came the voice of a Lazy M puncher, "which one of them Two-Bar-Two fellas is goin' to open the services. They look like they had come to a prayer meetin' instead of to a saloon. Yuh think that Randall fella is goin' to do it?"

"Me," said Curly, "I can preach a funeral sermon."

Well, that was handing it back to 'em all right, and the Two-Bar-Two men exploded in merriment. A sudden hush came over the Lazy M men. They ceased their lounging, came erect. Curly Randall moved. When he was still again, his feet were a little spread. He leaned slightly forward. His eyes gleamed. It was another moment, filled with possibilities. Simmons crouched, prepared to duck below the bar.

And then the door was flung open and Tilden came into the room.

CHAPTER III

NOTIFICATION

TILDEN was a man of fifty, too. He was a smaller man than Sharp, rather thin, but wiry and quick in his movements. His face, like Sharp's, was seamed by the weather.

He had swung open the doors like a man who has but one object, to get a drink. Life, heaven knew, was lonely enough for these men who, without families, shouldered heavy responsibilities to some vague end. Tilden liked to take a drink or two, to talk, to make merry a little after the fashion of men of the range. He had made the few purchases he needed, and he had nothing else especially to do.

But his keen eyes saw at once that he had stepped into something. Those eyes caught sight of Sharp first, standing a little in advance of the others. Then the eyes went to all the Two-Bar-Two men. Tilden's face hardened, for here was an entire lack of welcome, indeed almost an entire lack of recognition, unless disdainful steady stares could be called recognition.

Tilden, after the first swift traveling of his glance, stood still, the glance having come to rest on Sharp's face. Tilden's carelessness had vanished. He was completely master of himself as he stood there. He was waiting. Sharp and his men seemed to have something on their minds, something which concerned Tilden and his men.

Well, let Sharp, vain old fool, start the ball to rolling.

"Step up and licker, Mr. Tilden," Simmons invited, again in that thin voice.

"Shut up!" said Tilden tersely.

Simmons shut up. He put his hands on the bar and stooped, again ready to duck.

An ironic mood came to Tilden when he observed that Sharp was not going to set the ball in motion. Gosh, what'd this outfit think it was? Did it think it could overawe Tilden and the Lazy M by looking at them in that sad an' solemn manner?

"Good evenin', *Mister* Sharp," Tilden said.

A thin little smile came to Sharp's lips. Tilden had broken the ice. He had made Tilden break the ice. He had a feeling that victory so far lay with him. 'Course the ice had been pretty thin, and it hadn't needed much of a blow to break it. However, Tilden had struck that blow.

"Good evenin', Tilden," Sharp said.

"*Mister* Tilden!"

"You heard me speak."

Tilden's face darkened with anger then. He almost made a movement. His intention to do so was written on his face. But he restrained himself.

"Well, what the hell do you want?" he demanded. "You accused me of gittin' one of your men drunk. I haven't had no truck with him since then. I don't want no truck with him—or with you."

Sharp's thin smile grew to a grin.

"You act like a man backed up into a corner," he said.

"Backed up into a corner," Tilden cried furiously. "If there is a Two-Bar-Two man that can back me up into a corner, I haven't come acrost him in his travels."

"All the Two-Bar-Two men is still here," Sharp declared. "None of them has run away."

"Whoever hints that any of my men has run away—especially from any of your outfit—is a liar," Tilden stated.

"One has run away, with money in his clothes."

A little look of bewilderment came to Tilden's face. Sharp seemed to know something which Tilden did not know. That gave Sharp an advantage. Tilden felt that he had to have some information. He turned to his foreman. Anson stepped away from the bar.

"Oh I know what he is drivin' at," Anson said. "That new man Ridenour left us this mornin'. What is there in that? These fellas is spoilin' for a fight, and Sharp is grabbin' at that as an excuse. Gosh, is it the first time a man has come and then went?"

But Tilden knew that that was not all there was to it. Sharp wasn't a man to invent excuses or even to seek them. Tilden knew him too well.

"Watcha drivin' at, Sharp?" Tilden asked.

"That's the first sensible thing that has been said in this place tonight," Sharp said. "I have got things to say to you. I'll say them to you, man to man, outside."

"Don't yuh do it, Mr. Tilden," Anson said. "Don't leave this room with him. He will plug yuh if he gets a chance."

Strong, old ties are not so easily broken. The ties between these two men had been strong and they were old. Tilden knew that Anson was talking nonsense. There was a chance right at this moment to avert trouble if either man took advantage of it. Tilden looked at Sharp interestedly.

"There is room outside, Sharp," he said.

Sharp promptly walked to the door, pushed it open, and stepped into the night. Tilden followed him. The men of the two outfits did not rush after them. That would have been a violation of the code, and they knew, besides, that neither Tilden nor Sharp would stand for it.

OUTSIDE Tilden and Sharp faced each other. In this moment Tilden was merely expectant. If Sharp had asked him about the man Ridenour in a civil way, they might have got together. But, unfortunately perhaps, Sharp was in no gentle mood. He was in the grip of resentment now. He had thought a good deal of this man Tilden in times gone by, and now he had to accuse Tilden. He had to serve notice on him. Things had been going along pretty well, everything considered. They had been helping each other. Why, then, had Tilden stooped to so mean a revenge? For now Sharp was convinced that Tilden was guilty. Anson had confessed that Ridenour had been working for Tilden. Ridenour himself had boasted of what he had done. What he had done was wholly foul. Besides Sharp had been holding himself in. His anger was now struggling to vent itself. However,

when he spoke his voice was smooth enough. He aimed to be a little more clever than Tilden. Not much of a job!

"Tilden," Sharp said, "I am surprised at you."

"I'm glad yuh got some kind of a feelin'," said Tilden. "I always thought yuh was dead from your toes to your hair. It has always puzzled me how yuh managed to get around."

Sharp indulged some inward mirth. He had struck the right key all right. Tilden was gettin' madder 'n' madder.

"You are disturbin' wage conditions in this here country," Sharp stated.

Well, Tilden wasn't going to let himself be surprised any more. Sharp was going to be mysterious, was he? Tilden would ride along with him.

"Ain't that too bad?" Tilden purred. "Anybody would think I was payin' my hands with other people's money."

By gosh, if that wasn't as good as a confession, then Sharp didn't know what a confession was. Why, the old fool was almost bragging about his infamy.

"'Course," said Sharp, "it'd be fine if we could pay every man that works for us as much as two hundred dollars a month, but I don't see just how we could do it. That would be the fair and honest thing to do. Payin' bonuses, however, is discriminatin' against all the men in favor of the man that gets the bonus."

Tilden was altogether in the dark, but he wasn't going to let this old fossil know it. It looked as if Sharp were prodding him so that he could confess ignorance. Why, he wouldn't, now, confess ignorance to anything in this universe.

"Well, I'll tell you about bonuses," he said. "They gets action now and then. I will state that they gets action! A nice little bonus placed proper will get results that would surprise you, *Mister* Sharp."

"And the funny thing 'bout it is that you never know what them results will be," Sharp declared. "For instance, I don't suppose there ever was a war that wasn't goin' to be over 'bout the next Tuesday after it started."

"If I was runnin' a war, it wouldn't last long," Tilden said. "Do you know of any war that is about to break loose some place?"

"I can't tell," Sharp retorted pleasantly enough. "One thing I do know, I am servin' notice."

"On me?"

"On you? What in hell would I serve notice on you for? No! I am just tellin' the world at large. The notice is to the effect that I will put a bullet into the first man that I see roundin' up any of my cows. Funny, but my cows is mine. I like 'em alive. I can't sell a cow that a bullet has been shot into. Besides I miss my calves. Little, shamblin' calves is a speciality of mine. I like to keep 'em and see 'em grow up into an age of usefulness."

"Here's another funny thing," said Tilden. "A calf will grow up in one man's yard as fast as in another man's, other things bein' equal. I'm fond of calves myself. If it wasn't for calves this here cattle country would be in a bad way. Yuh might say that if there wasn't no calves there wouldn't be no beefsteaks by and by."

Sharp stiffened. He had heard all he wanted to hear.

"Yuh paid that fella Ridenour a bonus," he snarled.

"An' if I did, by God, I done it with my own money," snarled Tilden back. "I ain't makin' no accountin' to yuh about what I do with my money. Yuh come down here with your outfit tonight lookin' for trouble. Why don't yuh hop to it? Yuh got a gun on yuh. So have I."

Sharp hopped to it. He snapped out his gun and pressed it into Tilden's stomach.

"Let your stummick whirl for a minute and give what yuh call your brain a rest," he said.

Tilden had not expected Sharp would draw his gun. Why, the man had gone the limit! This was war indeed. There was no yielding in what Tilden said now, only a recognition of the situation and what it portended.

"Yuh got the drop on me temporary," he said. "Put up your gun an' say what yuh got to say. I will drag my own gun and speak afterwards next time."

"Yuh told me to hop to it," Sharp said, as he returned the gun to its holster.

FOR the time being, he knew, there would be no drawing of guns between him and Tilden. They would have to part and meet again before either would be free to draw.

"And now," said Sharp, "I am servin' another notice. It is on you, most especially. Beginnin' tomorrow me and my

men is ridin' all over this country. We are looking for cows that mebbe has got into pastures new."

"You are meanin' that you and your men are goin' to trample my grass?" Tilden asked.

"The grass may get trampled," Sharp agreed, "but we won't be meanin' to trample it. We will only be lookin' for cows that has got blotted brands on 'em."

"And if you find such cows, if any?"

"What belongs to a man belongs to him," Sharp declared.

"Which is a fact and a rule. And now is that all?"

"That is all."

With that Sharp turned and went back into the saloon. Tilden followed him.

"All right, men," said Sharp snappily.

The eyes of the Two-Bar-Two men strayed briefly to the Lazy M men. A little simultaneous sigh of regret issued from the lips of the first outfit. However, they followed Sharp out of the saloon.

It might have been expected that the sound of jeering laughter would come after them, but it did not. The Lazy M men had looked at their employer. Tilden had walked to the bar. As the door swung to behind the last Two-Bar-Two man, Tilden spoke.

"Gimme a bottle of pop, Simmons. Give all the boys a bottle of pop. Stir yourself. We are ridin' for home in twenty minutes."

So this was not the end of it, eh? War was on. It was not to be a war which could be fought with the weapons of derision and scorn. It would be a man's war. The Lazy M outfit was a sober crew as it left the saloon twenty minutes behind the Two-Bar-Two outfit. Nobody asked Tilden any questions. All questions would soon be answered.

CHAPTER IV

THE HUNT

WHEN the men of the Two-Bar-Two struck out across the flats next morning, Sharp did not go with them. He rode alone, leaving half an hour after they did.

This was a matter of etiquette. Sharp knew that Tilden and his men would be abroad, waiting for the Two-Bar-Two men. The enmity between Sharp and Tilden was now a definite and certain thing. It would not do for Sharp to come upon Tilden, alone, when Sharp had any of his men with him. The two men, when they met, would have their own special differences to settle. They must settle these man to man. Sharp knew that Tilden, too, would be riding alone. Tilden also would scorn aid when he met up with Sharp.

Everything was now clear in Sharp's mind. He was sure that Tilden had killed those cows and had stolen their calves. He had done it to get even with Sharp. Sharp remembered that he had been pretty severe with Tilden when they had had their row about Curly Randall, but that made no difference now. The original cause of the quarrel was lost sight of. Sharp had flashed his gun on Tilden. That could be evened up in only one way.

When Sharp left the house, he headed directly for Big Creek. When he reached the creek, he rode along it for half a dozen miles. Then he found a place where a horse had gone down to drink. Sharp looked at the tracks, and a hard smile came to his lips. Those tracks had been made by Tilden's horse, a big roan which Tilden was fond of when he was going on long, slow journeys. It was a horse of remarkable endurance, but it was splay-footed, and the tracks had been made by such a horse. Well, said Sharp to himself, Tilden was abroad all right.

Sharp turned his own horse away from the creek. He did not want to meet Tilden just yet. It was all right for a man to figure that he was in no danger from a certain other man, but Sharp knew that Tilden was as good a man with a gun as he himself was. Tilden might easily beat him to the draw. A good many factors entered into the swift getting out of a gun.

Big Creek came down from hills which were some five miles beyond where Sharp now was. The canyon in which Curly and Sadler had found the dead cows was in these hills. Following Tilden's tracks for a while, Sharp found they cut away over the flat. He decided to go on to the hills and see what he could discover there. Tilden ran some cattle in those hills, and Sharp had a notion he might find some of his own cattle in them. He might find cattle upon which the brand had been blotted, or upon which a vent brand and Tilden's own brand might have been placed. Sharp

inclined to the latter notion as he rode along. It would be almost impossible to change the Two-Bar-Two to the Lazy M. Of course if brands were added, Tilden would have to produce a bill of sale, but if a man would forge a brand he would forge a bill. All of which showed that Sharp was ready to believe almost anything of Tilden.

Sharp came to the foothills after a while. He stopped there and looked back across the flat. He could see no one. He rode into the foothills and came to a draw through which he passed. This brought him to another flat. Out on the flat a big herd was grazing. Sharp rode toward it smartly and then, as he neared it, more slowly. He went carefully round the herd, but he could find no brand but Tilden's own, standing alone or over against the brand of some one from whom Tilden had made purchases. Certainly, so far as Sharp could make out, there were no Two-Bar-Two cattle there.

Sharp conceded that he had had no right to believe that any of his cattle would be there. If Tilden had really stolen any cows, he probably had thrown them far off somewhere, so that Sharp would not be able to find them. Doggone the old coyote, he was gettin' lower and lower.

TURNING back through the hills, Sharp came out on the first flat again. He was in a frame of mind to meet him. He would teach him a lesson. Apparently Tilden had ridden off across the flat from Big Creek, and doubtless he would return before long.

Not the slightest advantage must be taken of Tilden, Sharp decided. He must have all the chance in the world. So instead of holding back in the hills, Sharp rode out into the open and halted his horse. The sun was now well up in the sky, and the sky was untouched by any cloud. Sharp sat as plainly revealed as a man could be.

He scanned the flat with eager eyes. He wanted to meet Tilden and get the meeting over with. Where could the old duffer be? A slight noise behind him was his answer to that. He wheeled his horse. Tilden was riding out of the draw. Sharp leaned forward, his eyes narrowed. Tilden seemed to be looking at him, but he was not sure that Tilden saw him.

Tilden did see him, however. He suddenly raised his right hand and rode forward. Uh huh, Sharp grunted to himself, the old "sucker" was going to play some kind of a game. He knew he was guilty and he was going to try to put one over on Sharp. Probably he had been to that canyon where the dead cows were and had found that two of Sharp's men had been there. Then he knew that Sharp was aware of what he had done. Well, Sharp couldn't even draw on him when he had his hand up like that. He would have to listen to what Tilden had to say.

"Sharp," Tilden said, as he stopped his horse twenty feet away, "I been thinkin' about this matter. I been sleepin' on it. It is a good idea to sleep on a thing."

Well, by gosh, there was a plaintive note in that old man's voice. Could it be that he was afraid? Sharp had to wonder about that. It didn't seem possible. He had seen Tilden face danger too many times, face it steadily, calmly. And yet he was either afraid or he was playing a game. Playing a game in these circumstances would be worse, if anything, than merely being afraid. He was giving a friendly sign to Sharp, while he was trying to pull something off.

Well, Sharp's gun was in its holster. He was ready for any move Tilden might make. He would let him palaver if he wanted to. But he wouldn't help him. Let him speak his piece.

"I ain't got it clear in my head just what is botherin' you," Tilden stated. "You are accusin' me of somethin', but I dunno what it is."

"You had that man Ridenour workin' for you," Sharp said.

"O' course I did, but so have I got other men ridin' for me. Men have come an' gone on your place. What is the harm in that?"

"You paid him a bonus."

"Me? What would I pay him a bonus for?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, yes!" Sharp saw just what Tilden was up to. He was trying to find out what Sharp knew. He had been to that canyon and had seen the tracks. He wanted to make sure that they were the tracks of horses belonging to Sharp's men.

"Why," Sharp said, "you prob'ly paid him a bonus because he was good-lookin'."

A great effort must have been required on Tilden's part to lead him to do what he had done. He had made a peace overture and the overture had been rejected. What'd this fella think—that he was going to crawl to him? In one more second his hand was coming down, and then Sharp would see how matters really stood. But first he would rob Sharp of any notion that he was afraid of him.

"Whoever says I paid anybody a bonus is a liar," he declared.

"I say it."

"You—"

The report of a gun cut that sentence short on its first word. The shot had apparently come from up on one of the hills. Its echoes were still among the hills when Sharp and Tilden drew their guns, together. They did not menace each other with them, however. They wheeled their horses in the direction from which the shot had come.

There was immediately another shot and then another, and then there was silence. The bullets appeared to have gone high over the heads of the two men.

"He ain't trying to hit us," Sharp said. "Be a good idea if we was to draw up against the hills, though, Bill."

The name slipped out unconsciously. Tilden did not seem to notice Sharp's use of it. At any rate it had no softening effect on him. He sent his horse up under one of the hills, and Sharp followed him.

"That was one of them ruffians you have workin' for you," Tilden stormed. "He was tryin' to shoot me in the back."

"None of my men," Sharp declared. "What you say gives me an idea. It was one of your men. You come out there with your hand up, so I wouldn't go for my gun. Then one of them human coyotes of yours was goin' to pot me. I'm going after him. You ain't got the guts to shoot me, in the back or otherwise. You have gone all soft."

He pulled his horse about, intending to send him through the draw.

"LUKE," Tilden yelled, "you wait a minute, you cussed old fool, you. You are off on the wrong foot. There ain't none of my men within a dozen miles of here. They are over on the other side of Big Creek."

"Well, every one of my men is over there, too," Sharp said, stopping his horse.

The two former friends looked at each other closely. Sharp was the first to speak.

"You're tellin' the truth, Bill," he said. "I can see it in your eyes. I could always tell when you was lyin'."

"Why, I never told you a lie in my life," Tilden stormed. "What is this matter of bonuses?"

"You paid that fella Ridenour a bonus to kill a bunch of my cows and carry off their calves," Sharp said, and then seeing the look of righteous indignation in Tilden's eyes, he amended: "Leastways that is what I have been led to believe."

"I am a rustler, then?"

"In order to get even with me for that run-in we had about Curly Randall."

"Son-of-a-gun if you ain't in your dotage," Tilden cried. "Why, I would shoot you if I wanted to get even with you that bad. I got more cows now than any sane man ought to have."

"But to get even with me," Sharp said weakly.

His weak voice seemed to settle the matter with Tilden. He gave him a pitying look.

"I'm through," Tilden said. "I couldn't fight with a man that has lost his mind. I will see that you are shut up some place."

For once Sharp was at a loss for a retort. He turned his eyes up toward the top of the hill from which the shots had come.

"See here, Bill," he said. "Somebody took a couple shots at us. We better get him."

"We better had," Tilden agreed. "Lemme get ahead of you."

"I'll take the lead. I—"

Sharp stopped, and a look of horror came over his face.

"Bill," he said, "you say your boys are over beyond Big Creek?"

"They sure are."

"So are mine. Bill, if them boys meets up with neither you nor me there, they will mix it and somebody will stop some lead. Bill, you didn't kill them cows or have 'em killed?"

"Fool, I did not!"

"Bill, we got to get over beyond Big Creek."

"And we'll not do it sittin' our horses right here," Tilden said.

Sharp turned his horse and started off across the flat. Tilden followed him.

CHAPTER V

CROSS FIRE

SHARP was mounted on a smart sorrel horse. It had not the endurance of Tilden's big roan, but it was fleeter. Sharp soon saw that he must accommodate himself to Tilden's pace or leave Tilden behind. Tilden of course wouldn't like to be left behind, but there was more than that to think of.

Sharp saw that he had made a terrible mistake. He had believed that foul report which Simmons had sent to him. Against the babble of a drunken puncher, he had failed to set over what he had known about Tilden. Tilden had always been square, and yet Sharp had believed that he had suddenly turned thief to get even with Sharp. The cattleman called himself all kinds of a fool, but that did not help matters now.

Those two outfits were over beyond Big Creek. Sharp's own men had been held in check in town. They had undoubtedly chafed under that. They would be r'arin' to go when they met up with Tilden's men. Just let Tilden's men say one word, and—zing!—the battle would be on. Why, some of those boys might be killed, and their deaths would be Sharp's responsibility. Sharp felt sweat break out on him when he thought of that.

Well, he would have to leave Tilden behind. That would bring him into the danger zone alone. Tilden's men, if their fighting blood was up, would not listen to him. Indeed they would probably believe that he had come to help his own men. Instead of ceasing to fight his men, they would turn on him also. That, however, was only a fleeting thought. His own safety was a small matter. It weighed little compared to the wrath which he knew he would rouse in Tilden when he ran away from Tilden. Tilden would say things which he would doubtless regret later. And Sharp would have to swallow whatever Tilden said. What a mess!

Sharp leaned over the sorrel.

"Horse," he commanded, "stretch yore legs."

He spurred him, and the horse stretched his legs. They carried him rapidly away from Tilden. Tilden seemed to see immediately what Sharp was doing, and, as Sharp had expected, he yelled his protest.

"Hey, stop that! Doggone you, if you run away from me like this. I will stop you with a bullet."

Sharp did not believe that. He did not believe it even when there was a gun report behind him, and a bullet passed over him. Angry as he was, Tilden, Sharp was sure, would not incapacitate him in this critical moment. He only spurred his horse the harder. Tilden's yells grew fainter and fainter and then ceased altogether. Looking back, Sharp saw that Tilden was frantically urging his horse, but the big animal was unable to lessen the gap between them.

Within two miles Sharp came to a ford in the creek. As he passed over it he let the horse take a couple of mouthfuls of water, and then he urged him out of the stream and up the bank. There was rolling country on this side of the creek, and Sharp could see but a little way. However, he knew his course lay toward the hills which bent in toward him in a semicircle. The men would either be somewhere on this rolling plain or they would be among the hills.

Sharp dashed on toward the hills. The sorrel began to tire. Presently it floundered and Sharp had to pull it up and let it walk while it took its breath. His eyes scanned the surrounding country as he topped each succeeding rise, but there was no one in sight. When his horse was rested a little, he spurred him on again. He had covered a third of the distance to the hills and now he covered a third more. The hills distinctly outlined themselves, but they were squat and silent in the sunlight. Sharp began to hope that his men or Tilden's had gone separate ways after missing each other.

He studied his horse and went forward at a lope. All at once he saw a rider cutting in toward him. His hand went to the butt of his gun. Then he recognized Tilden's big roan. Tilden had apparently not caught sight of him. He was urging the roan forward at top speed. Sharp turned his sorrel a little so that he should be riding directly toward Tilden. Tilden came on for several minutes, and then he saw Sharp.

He seemed bent on ignoring Sharp now. He swerved a little away from him, so that he followed the line of the hills perhaps a mile from them. Sharp knew the country as well as Tilden did, and he perceived that Tilden was making for a cut through the hills. He probably had a notion that the

men had passed through this cut and had gone out on the flat beyond.

SHARP spurred his horse again. Tilden thought he was smart, didn't he? He had sent his horse through the creek at its deepest point and had climbed a bank which it was almost impossible for a horse to negotiate. The horse might have slipped back and have injured itself, but Tilden, in his eagerness to outwit Sharp, had taken a chance. The old fool had always been game to take a chance, and like most men who take chances he had come through. However, Sharp knew that he now had a pretty race on his hands to get to the cut first.

Sharp knew that he was headed directly for the cut, and now Tilden, having come to within a third of a mile of it, began cutting in toward it. All was forgiven between the two old friends. Why, certainly. But Sharp wasn't going to let Tilden beat him to that cut if he could help it.

Tilden, however, had a little advantage. When he turned to cut in he had not so far to go as Sharp had. The big roan was lumbering now, doing his best, but he was no race horse. The sorrel seemed to have got his second wind, and he was eating up the distance.

The result was that when they were about two hundred feet from the cut, the two riders came abreast. Tilden had completed his half circle, and was headed straight in as Sharp came up to him.

"You keep back now," Tilden yelled. "I'm goin' in there first."

There was no argument about that fortunately. Tilden had no sooner got the words off his lips than there was the sound of a shot in among the hills. There was then, quickly, a second shot, and after that a volley. Then silence. The two riders stopped their horses together, and they were so close to each other that their stirrups touched.

" 'Bout time we quit our nonsense, Bill," Sharp said soberly. "Them boys of ours have cut loose."

"Mebbe not," Tilden said. "Mebbe whoever fired on us is in on this thing, Luke. There is a general mix-up some place."

"If it is our boys, they are hidin' out," Sharp said. "I wouldn't be surprised if they was screenin' themselves on each side of the cut and firin' whenever there was anything to fire on."

"What fools men is," said Tilden.

Sharp gave him a sidewise glance and then he spurred his horse. The sorrel leaped forward. Tilden divined his intention. He was going to ride into the cut. His hope was that when his own men saw him, they would stop firing—definitely. Tilden's men might think he had come to aid his own men, and they might stick a bullet into him; but that was a chance he had to take.

As he dashed forward, he expected to hear Tilden yell to him to stop, but Tilden did not yell. Instead of that Sharp heard the heavy tread of the big horse behind him. Why, of course! Old Tilden would rush right into danger. He didn't have no sense. Sharp forgot that Tilden was doing no more than he himself was doing.

Sharp reached the mouth of the cut. As if his coming had been a signal, three shots were fired. Sharp judged that two had come from his left and one from the other side. Then his own boys must be on the left. They would give Tilden's boys two for one. No questions about that!

The floor of the cut was rocky and uneven, and Sharp had to slow down his horse. That gave Tilden a chance to range up beside him. As they went into the cut in that fashion, Sharp looked up at the rim on his left hand. Suddenly a bare head bobbed up there. It drew an immediate bullet from the other side. Then there were several exchanges, followed by a volley. Every man on each side had got his gun into action, Sharp judged.

And the bullets from the left side came uncomfortably close to Sharp and Tilden. The reason for this, Sharp swiftly saw, was that the hills on the right were flat and low while those on the left were high and saw-toothed. The men on one side had to fire upward, those on the other downward. Tilden and Sharp were caught in a crossfire.

The two men stopped their horses and together they yelled to the men to stop their cussed shootin'. Their yells were drowned out by a volley from both sides. A bullet went through Sharp's hat.

"That was from your side," he snorted to Tilden, "Them cussed outlaws of yours can't even shoot."

"I'd say that shot come pretty close to you," Tilden said.

There were no more shots now, and Tilden raised his voice and called the name of one of his men. A surprised answer came.

"That you Mr. Tilden?"

"Why, cern'ly. You boys put up your guns."

"You better get out of there," the voice warned. "You are liable to get a bullet in you. Them skunks of Sharp's are tryin' to pick us off."

"I'm here, too," Sharp yelled. "Sheldon, are you up there?"

For answer to that Sheldon, Sharp's foreman, hoisted himself up from behind the rim of rock that had sheltered him. He stared down at the two men in amazement, and then, since suspicion was rife this morning, he bellowed:

"Has that old fella got you hung up, Mr. Sharp? If he has, say the word. I will pick him off from here."

"He hasn't got me hung up," Sharp called back. "There has been a big mistake. Get out of sight, Sheldon. One of them coyotes is liable to pick *you* off."

"Huh, they couldn't hit the hull outdoors," Sheldon said scornfully.

"You boys up there stop your foolishness," Tilden yelled. "I will stick a bullet into the first man that fires a shot."

On both sides heads appeared above the rims. The men of both outfits stared down at their employers. Only Curly Randall grinned. Leave it to Curly to see the humorous side of things.

"The war is over," he called.

THE men disappeared and presently, Two-Bar-Two men and Lazy M men jostling together, came riding down the cut. They halted beyond Tilden and Sharp.

Sharp cleared his throat. He had a little job to do, and, characteristically, he started to do it at once.

"Men," he said, "I been all kinds of a fool. I—"

"Jest a minute, jest a minute," Tilden interrupted. "Less keep the record straight. Curly Randall, you step out here."

Curly, grinning, stepped out.

"You mind that day I met you in Simmons' saloon?" Tilden asked.

"I mind it."

"What was I tryin' to do?" Tilden asked. "Was I tryin' to get you drunk or was I jest savin' your life?"

"Savin' my life," Curly said. "I was busted flat, and you come in, an' I give you a look, an' you said you knowed how I felt, an' you offered me a drink, an' I took it. My tongue was hangin' out."

"An' in comes Sharp and thinks I'm gettin' one of his men drunk," said Tilden. "In his muddled mind an act of mercy becomes a crime."

"That was the way of it, Mr. Sharp," Curly stated.

"I ain't been two fools," Sharp said drily. "I said once that I been all kinds of a fool. Once ought to be enough. I apologize to Tilden for my suspicions. They was unworthy of me."

"Unworthy of me, you mean," Tilden declared.

"You didn't have 'em," Sharp said. "Well, boys, that's how it is. I done my old friend a wrong, and now the wrong is righted."

"How about them cows he murdered?" Sheldon asked coldly.

"Sheldon, if you say that again, you can go for your gun," Tilden said.

"That was all a mistake, too," Sharp put in. "It wasn't Tilden. I don't know who it was. I—"

He stopped, and his eyes bulged a little. He turned to Tilden.

"Say, old-timer," he exploded, "we have got a job on our hands. How about whoever it was that fired on us back there?"

"By gosh, I had plumb forgot about that," Tilden cried. "There is somethin' wrong here some place, and we have got to find out what it is."

The men of the two outfits held each other in no more contempt than outfits usually did. They were only loyal men who would stick along with their employers, no matter what happened. Now, seeing that there was nothing more to fight about among themselves, they hustled in toward the two men. They looked like one group, with a single object, as they stopped. Two-Bar-Two men and Lazy M men were mingled together.

Sharp hastily explained about the shots. He told how they had gone wide.

"They wasn't tryin' to get you," Sheldon opined. "They was only keepin' you back. Why, if you want my opinion and will let me give it to you, it is that us two outfits has got a common foe to give battle to. Somebody has been tryin' to draw a

herrin'—one of these here fish—acrost the trail."

"We will go an' have a look," said Sharp.

He and Tilden rode out of the cut and started their horses at a lope. Behind them came eighteen men. There was no enmity between them now. They rode stirrup to stirrup indiscriminately.

"We got to watch them two old boys," Sheldon confided to Anson. "They are gettin' sennul. But don't try to drive 'em. I will make only a suggestion when I see how the land lays and you back me up."

"I can read a sign my own self," said Anson tartly.

"Anybody can read a sign," Sheldon retorted cheerfully, "but it takes a good man to interprit it."

"Tish," said the other.

They went back by way of the ford and came up to the place at which Tilden and Sharp had been fired upon.

When they arrived there, Sharp held up his hand and the men stopped their horses. Except for the creak of leather and the faint jingle of metal there was no sound in the morning stillness.

"Them shots come from right up there," Tilden said, pointing. "There is somethin' queer about all this. I don't believe there is a soul within twenty miles of us right this minute."

"I don't believe there is a human bein' or an animal except these here horses we are sittin'," Sharp agreed. He suddenly remembered something. "Tilden," he went on, "before you come up I rode in to the flat on the other side. A bunch of your cows was over there."

"My cows?" Tilden exclaimed. "I ain't had nothin' over here for some little time. Grass is played out. I throwed all my cows over beyond the creek a month ago. You must be mistaken."

"It wasn't no mirage," Sharp declared. "I was too close. And I reckon I know a cow when I see one."

"Well, less get through there," Anson said impatiently. "I am beginnin' to guess what this is all about."

ANSON'S father had been a trapper before him. Anson had both an inherited and an acquired ability to read signs. Sharp and Tilden fell back and let the foreman lead the way. The other men followed. They came out on the flat and spread out in a line. Sharp stared. There was not a cow in sight.

"Huh," Tilden laughed, "I reckon you been seein' things, Luke."

"I seen cows, real cows," Sharp said soberly.

"Well, you fellas keep back and lemme have a look at this sitooation," Anson ordered. "Don't go out there and gum things up."

He dismounted and went forward on foot. The other men sat their horses, watching him. Stooping, he went over the ground where Sharp had lately ridden while he was examining the cattle. Presently he straightened up and came back to his employer. He stood below him.

"There ain't nothin' mysterious about this," he said. "It'll give you a clew to what all this business is about. Them cattle has been here for some little time, just how long I dunno. They has been *held* here."

"Held here?" Sharp asked.

"*Held.* That's what I'm tryin' to tell you. They has been collected over beyond Big Creek mos' likely and brought here. The work has been goin' on for two-three days mebbe. How many cows was in that bunch, Mr. Sharp?"

"Coupla hundred."

"Then somebody has walked off with a coupla hundred cows."

"*My* cows!" said Tilden.

"Seemed all to have the Lazy M brand," Sharp said.

Tilden sat his horse and looked at the ground for a space. Then he turned his suddenly suspicious eyes on Sharp.

"Say, are you tryin' to put somethin' over on me?" he demanded.

"As how?"

"Have you been runnin' my cows off just to make a fool out of me because you and me had a little fuss?"

"Don't be a fool," Sharp said. "Would I kill my own cows and run off their calves? Anson says these here cows have been held. My men have all been here. You saw 'em last night, too. I don't hire no strangers to do dirty work for me."

"Yuh needn't bring that up," Tilden returned smartly. "Well, where's them cows now, Anson?"

"They have been driv' off along the hills," Anson said. "Here's the way she looks to me. Sharp come ridin' up here and went

out and had a look at them cows. Whoever was holdin' 'em had a lookout. When the lookout seen Sharp comin' he give the alarm, and them fellas went into hidin'. They watched Sharp, while he looked the cows over. When Sharp left, they come back on the job. The lookout kep' to *his* job. Tilden come up and the lookout was afraid that the two of you would come here to have a look together. They prob'ly thought you had missed them cows, Mr. Tilden, and was goin' to run 'em back to where they was took from. So they tried to scare you off by shootin' at you. They thought that you would think they had you outnumbered bad. When you run away, they thought you was scared. Then they drove the cows off along the hills. I can get the start of that trail plain enough."

"Get your nose to the ground and follow that trail, Anson," Sharp ordered. "All of us will give Tilden a hand in gettin' back his cows."

Tilden might have said he needed no help, but he didn't say it. The unwritten law was at work. Objections would have been bad form.

CHAPTER VI

FOLLOWING THE HERD

THEY rode for two miles along the hills, and then these became higher and higher Presently they rose abruptly into mountains. The men followed a slope and came out on a bench. From here they could see for a long distance. Below them in a broad valley, they caught sight of the cattle. Four men rode with them.

"They are a-hustlin' them, too," Anson said. "They got an idea they will be followed. Like as not they have got some place picked out where they can hole in."

"Where do you suppose them fellas hail from, Sharp?" Tilden asked. "No cattle are run beyond here that I know of. Far as I know there ain't no water handy."

"Oh, there must be water in these mountains," Sharp answered. "I ain't never been through them, but you'd expect water. There must be good pasture here, too. It'd be fine in the lowlands in the spring an' it'd hold long into the summer higher up. Have any of you boys heard of a new outfit comin' in here?"

Nobody had heard of any new outfit.

"Ain't seen any strangers in town at any time?"

"That fella Ridenour is the only one," Curly Randall said.

"Oh, that drunken bum," said Sharp, dismissing Ridenour thus.

"Well, what yuh goin' to do?" Anson asked. "Yuh goin' down there an' hop them fellas or yuh goin' to let 'em drag them cows from here to hellangone?"

"There *must* be a new outfit in here some place," Sharp returned. "That bein' so, it ain't likely that the whole outfit is herdin' them cows. There is likely a nest of them. There ain't no room in this country for a nest like that. We got to clean it out."

The men below were urging the cattle along, so that the animals were at a half-trot.

"I am losin' a ton of meat a minute," Tilden lamented, "but I reckon you got the right idea, Luke. I can afford the loss if we clean out a nest."

They stood looking down till they saw the cattle wind about the base of a mountain. They were immediately lost to view.

"We will go down into the valley," Sharp said.

They returned by the way they had come, and after a while, by a detour, they came out into the broad valley.

"If there is an outfit beyond here, it is a new outfit," Anson said. "No cows has been eatin' this grass this year. Ain't been eatin' it no year far as that goes."

Sharp and Tilden saw that this was true. The grass had grown rank and untouched through the spring and summer and had fallen down. It now billowed, brown but abundant, across the valley. The trail which the passing herd had made was plain in it.

The men followed the trail till they came to the spot at which the cows had disappeared. Before they passed around the base of the mountain Sharp called a halt.

"You got to figure on an ambush," he said. "Them fellas' suspicions is roused. They may be layin' for us. Wait here."

He dismounted and moved around the base of the mountain. He was gone for several minutes. When he returned, a frown puckered his forehead.

"They have plumb disappeared," he told Anson. "What are we goin' to do now?"

"Foller them," Anson said, "but not all of us. We are too many. About seven of

us better go forward. We will move back for half a mile. At the end of half a mile we will send a man back, and he can bring the other boys up. In that way we won't get much out of touch with each other, but we won't be so many that it will look like an army on the move."

Every man wanted to be among the seven to go forward, but none asked to go. They knew it would do no good. Sharp and Tilden would take whomever they wanted to take.

Sharp chose Curly and Sheldon and let Tilden choose his foreman and two other men. The party went around the base of the mountain and found themselves in a continuation of the valley. The valley narrowed here, however, and it seemed to end not more than half a mile beyond them.

"There is a pass through here some place," Anson said, "unless the earth opened and swallowed up them cows. We better cross over and hug the other side."

They crossed over in single file.

"There's your trail," Anson said as they neared the other side. "Them cows ain't far from here. It'd take quite a little time for 'em to cross here and they wouldn't have much time left to go along. They was gettin' pretty tired. They had been without water for some time while they was held, and they wouldn't be in no good shape to travel. We better keep our eyes open. You fellas press in there, and I will keep an eye on the trail."

HE RODE out from them a little way and went along with them at that distance. Suddenly he held up his hand, and the men, who had been watching him, stopped. Anson pointed ahead of him. Sharp saw that ahead of him there was a mountainside which jutted out into the valley. He had often seen that formation before, and he had an idea beyond that shoulder there was the opening of a canyon. If it were a box canyon the cattle might be huddled in there. He thought it more likely that the canyon drew through the mountains and brought out on another valley or into a flat. He beckoned Anson and Tilden to him. "We got to watch ourselves now," Sharp said. "Two-three of us better go forward and have a look beyond that shoulder. Me and Anson can go."

"I'm goin'," said Tilden stoutly, "but I'm tellin' yuh there better be four of us. There were four of them herders. If that is a canyon there and it runs through, them fellas might start the cattle in and then wait at the canyon's mouth. Them cattle would drift right through without no urgin'. They must be half crazy for water by now."

"Well, come on, then," Sharp said.

Tilden nodded to one of his men, a tall, lanky fellow of cool nerves and abundant strength. They went forward slowly on foot. When they reached the shoulder of the mountain they stopped and listened. There was no sound beyond them.

"I'll have a look," Sharp said.

He dropped to his stomach and began to wriggle forward. He heard a slight rustling noise behind him and looking around he saw that Tilden was crawling after him. When he was in the protection of the shoulder, Sharp stopped and listened again. Tilden followed his example. For a moment there was no sound, and then there was a slight scraping. It might, Sharp knew, have been made by the boots of a man suddenly rising.

His gun in his hand, Sharp waited. He expected a man to come into view, but no man came immediately. Instead the barrel of a rifle was thrust out. Sharp was immediately aware what that meant. The rifle barrel sloped downward, so that its muzzle was pointed slantingly toward the ground. Sharp could vision a man behind that weapon. He was holding the stock under his right shoulder and the barrel in his left hand; and he was creeping out to see what there was to see. Sharp was sure he had not made a noise sufficiently loud for any watcher to hear. Therefore the man had either sensed his coming or he was merely going to have a look on general principles.

While no more than one second passed, Sharp considered what he should do. He could do one of three things, he saw. He could cover the man with his own gun and attempt to overawe him; he could shoot him; or he could seize the rifle barrel and attempt to wrest it from the man's hands. He discarded the first two plans. He did not know how many men he had to deal with. The sound of a shot might prove disastrous. If he covered the man and he resisted, he would have to shoot him.

SO HE came swiftly to his knees and seized the barrel of the rifle. He was fortunate in two respects. The man must have had a foot off the ground as he took a step, and he must not have had his hand on the trigger of the rifle. Keeping out of the way of the muzzle, Sharp pulled hard on the rifle barrel, pulling it toward him: The man's hands must instinctively have clutched his weapon tighter when the first pull came. He was swept into view. As he came Sharp exerted all his strength, sweeping the muzzle of the rifle past his side. The man came whirling around toward Sharp. He lost his footing and his hold on the rifle at the same time, and he went to his knees at Sharp's feet. Tilden was up soundlessly and swiftly. He covered the man with his gun, and the man knelt there and looked up at him in silence.

Sharp leaned down to him and put his lips to the man's ear.

"How many more in there?" Sharp whispered. "Use your fingers."

The man held up two fingers. Sharp saw what had happened. One man had gone on behind the cattle while the other three had remained here on guard. Luckily they had not been very watchful. They had screened themselves and in doing so they had shut off their own view.

That was about the kind of trick this fellow would play, Sharp saw. He was good enough physically, but he was not blessed with brains. In his fall his hat had come off, and a bullet head with a sloping brow was revealed. Coarse black hair ran down over his forehead, and below it stupid, bewildered eyes looked out.

Sharp opened his lips to ask another question. He had no time.

"Comstock, where are you?" a voice asked.

Sharp shook his head at the still kneeling man, and he made no answer. There was the sound of swift feet beyond the shoulder. The sound stopped. Sharp had been staring straight ahead at his own level. He looked down just in time. A bare head was thrust out at the base of the rock. Sharp jammed his gun into the face.

The man was apparently so startled that he acted instinctively. He pulled back his head. There was the sound of his getting to his feet. Then there was the additional sound of two men running.

"Watch this fella," Sharp called to Tilden.

But Tilden would not obey. The lust for a fight was in the veteran's blood now. He leaped to the head of the canyon. He began to pour bullets after the fleeing men. When his gun was empty, he reached for Sharp's gun. Sharp shook his head savagely.

"Dammit," he said, "you have spilled the beans now. You didn't get either of them fellas, did you?"

"I didn't," Tilden returned. "Gimme your gun."

The mischief was done. Sharp saw, and he handed his gun to Tilden. Tilden lifted it but he did not pull the trigger. He stood staring up the canyon.

"Gone!" he lamented.

CHAPTER VII

PERSUASIVE ROPE

"CURLY," Sharp ordered, "you hurry back and bring up the other boys." Curly Randall sped away, and Sharp turned his attention to the man whom he had captured.

"Time is precious," Sharp informed him, "Tell us all you know."

"I cain't talk," the man said.

"Huh, you're a stranger in these parts. From Missouri, mebbe."

"I cain't talk."

"Afraid?"

"Any man that talks will get a bullet in him," the man stated.

"If you don't talk, you will get worse than a bullet," Sharp said.

The man looked at Sharp, whose face had gone cold and hard. He then looked at Tilden and the other men. Tilden frowned at him, but the other men showed only a sort of indifference. A shiver went through the man. That indifference seemed to frighten him more than Tilden's and Sharp's threatening attitudes. However, he only shook his head.

"How many men in your outfit?" Sharp asked.

Another shake of the head.

"You been makin' a collection of meat," Sharp stated.

The man looked at the ground now. His shoulders were hunched together, and he had a desolate air. He seemed to feel that his finish was near, no matter what he did.

Sharp shook out his rope. He walked up to the man and dropped the rope over his head. Then he mounted his horse. He sent the horse forward a few steps, and the rope tightened about the man's neck. He raised his head and looked at Sharp with bleak eyes.

"Got to do it," Sharp said. "Tell us what we want to know or—"

He shrugged his shoulders significantly. The man's eyes went from one face to another, but he found no sign of relenting in any of those faces. The eyes then went back to Sharp. Sharp was in the attitude of sending his horse forward. The man would be jerked from his feet, the rope would tighten about his neck. Dragged over that rough ground, he would be choked to death. Here was a certain and present peril instead of the peril which had sealed his lips.

"Wait!" he pleaded.

Sharp brought his horse around, so that he faced the man.

"Just a second or two," he said.

"Whatcha want to know?" the man asked.

"I'll ask you a question or two. Give us your answers pronto. I won't tell you when I start again. I'll just start. Do you know a man named Ridenour?"

"He was over here a few times."

"Did he rustle some cows?"

"Why, no. He just rode in at night to see Manly."

"Did Manly, whoever he is, hire Ridenour to spread a story about stolen calves and dead mothers?"

"Not that I ever heard of," the man answered convincingly.

Sharp mulled that over for a minute. He saw that Manly was undoubtedly the leader of this outfit. He was the kind of leader who used the men associated with him. He didn't take them into his confidence any more than he had to. Probably he had more brains than this fellow or than any of the rest of them, for that matter.

"Who's Manly?" Sharp asked.

The man's brown face paled. He was afraid of Manly, Sharp saw.

"Manly can't hurt you here," Sharp pointed out. "We can. You can take your choice."

"Why, Manly is the boss," the man replied simply. "He organized us and brought us here."

"How many cows have you rustled?"

"There is a lot of them over beyond the canyon."

"Lazy M cows?"

"And Two-Bar-Two."

"What's beyond the canyon?"

"Kind of a big bowl over there, quarter mile across. Plenty of grass, some water. Mountains all around."

"How many men besides you?"

"Six besides me and them two fellas that was with me."

"Eight in all now," Sharp said. "Where did you all come from?"

"From the East. Been driftin' here and there."

"What were you going to do with them cows?"

"Work over the brands if we could. Anyhow, drive 'em south an' get rid of 'em."

"How long you been operatin' here?"

"Been here nearly three months."

"Who killed them cows and piled 'em up in that box canyon?"

"I didn't! I heard Manly and some of the men talkin' about it."

"All right!" Sharp turned to Tilden. "Have your man watch him," he said. "He can tie him up if he wants to."

Tilden, in his turn, nodded to the lanky puncher who had come with them. The cowboy apparently wasn't going to stand guard. It took him less than a minute to truss up the man with a picket rope. He rolled him to one side as if he had been something inanimate.

"WHAT'LL we do first, Bill?" Sharp asked Tilden.

"Curly ought to be back here with them boys soon," Tilden said. "We better wait for them. We can't have a divided party, workin' at loggerheads."

He spoke as if the matter were entirely in their own hands, but it proved not to be. There were suddenly three shots, close together. Bullets spatted down just beyond them.

"Hug the rocks, boys," Sharp called. "They are tryin' to get us from above."

As they ran to shelter, Sharp looked up. He saw at first only the sloping side of the mountain, but just before he flattened himself against the rock, his eyes picked out a shelf which projected from the mountainside and ran around it. He imagined that the men who had fired on them were lying

full length on this shelf. He understood, too, that the men were armed with rifles. At that distance they would have the advantage over men armed only with six-guns.

The whole situation as it had developed itself in the past had become plain to the cattleman. This outfit had been traveling over the country, stealing cattle and anything else on which they could lay their hands. They had turned up here and had carried on their nefarious work. There was no way of telling how many head of cattle they were holding in that natural corral over yonder. A good many, probably. They had been holding them and adding to them for quite a long time now, and they must be about ready to move.

Sharp believed that Manly had not been with the men who had been holding the additional herd that morning. Probably those men had been of the type of this man whom they had captured, low-browed ruffians without many brains. When they had seen Sharp and Tilden together, they had lost their heads and had fired upon them instead of waiting to see what they would do. In that way they had given Sharp and Tilden a clew.

The part which Ridenour had played was also clear enough. He had been a member of the outfit. Instead of remaining with it, however, while it carried on its work, he had gone over to Tilden's ranch and had got a job. He had kept in touch with the outlaws' camp and had doubtless given the outlaws valuable information. Also when the time was ripe, he had tried to set Tilden and Sharp and their respective outfits against each other. He had almost succeeded in that. Only a lucky chance had kept the two outfits from a bloody war that morning.

The reason why Manly had sought to do this was obvious enough. There were no other outfits within a number of miles. Manly was stealing from these two. If he could get them arrayed against each other, he could make his getaway while their battle was on. He must have quite a head on his shoulders, that fella Manly. He had almost made two old-timers look silly. Well, the thing was out in the open now. At that moment all Sharp wanted was to get his hands on Manly. Manly was a candidate for the end of a rope if ever a man was.

This train of thought was interrupted by a low cry from Tilden.

"Here comes Curly Randall and them other boys," Tilden said. "You would think they was goin' to a picnic. Lookit them skylarkin' along, ridin' right out in the open. Some of them will get themselves picked off, Bill."

Sharp looked along the valley. He saw the men coming along at an unhurried gait. They did indeed act as if they were on their way to a picnic instead of to an engagement which might prove deadly. Sharp called to them at the top of his voice, but they seemed not to hear him. The sound of their onward movement and their talk and laughter among themselves made enough noise to drown out the sound of Sharp's voice. Their talk and their laughter was the louder because they had lately been ready to leap at each other's throats, but were now united in a common cause. They were good fellows all, and Sharp saw that they found relief in the fact that they did not have to give battle to each other. The poison of suspicion which had begun to run through them had been swept out. That, however, did not lessen the danger into which they were riding. Every minute Sharp expected to hear the bark of a rifle from above his head.

He did not hesitate. These were his men and Tilden's men. He was responsible for them. He had led them into this. If he had to be the first to be sacrificed, why, he would be the first. He was still mounted while Tilden was afoot. He wheeled his horse and dashed toward the oncoming men.

THE snipers up on the shelf had undoubtedly been waiting for the riders to draw nearer before they opened fire. When they saw Sharp, however, they no longer waited. He heard a confusion of shots, so close together that he could not count them. One thing came to him flashingly. At least six of the men whom the captured man had spoken of must be up on that shelf. That would leave two somewhere else.

From their being there so soon after the men had run up the canyon one of two things was to be deduced. Either they had been there all the while or else that canyon was not a real canyon at all, but a mere break in the mountain wall. In that

case the held cattle must be just over these mountains.

That much arrived at, Sharp found himself nearer the men. When they had heard the shots they had halted, undecided what to do. Apparently they had not determined where the shots had come from. In their loyalty they had kept their eyes on Sharp as he galloped toward them, and they had probably been held by astonishment when he had made his sudden dash.

"Get into shelter unless you want to be picked off," Sharp called. "Follow me."

He turned his horse and dashed for shelter. He heard the men gallop after him; as they neared shelter, there was another volley from above them, but no one was hit.

"There's half a dozen men up there," Sharp said, with a wave of his hand. "You fellas would have ridden right into their fire if it hadn't been for me. Have I got to watch you every minute? Come along now and don't even stick out a finger."

"Just whereabouts are them fellas, Mr. Sharp?" Curly Randall asked.

"Up on a shelf above Tilden and the other boys," Sharp answered.

"Mr. Sharp," Curly pleaded, "lemme take four-five of the boys and go up and come in behind 'em. We can get 'em slick as pie."

Sharp looked at the handsome youngster. Curly bent over his horse's head to finger a throat latch which needed no attention. Sharp understood, and he was surprised. He had never thought that Curly felt any shame for his derelictions when he went into town, but he knew now that Curly wanted to show that he had good stuff in him.

"We will see, Curly," he said gently. "We will have to powwow with Tilden. The old boy is kinda touchy, y' know."

Even Tilden's own men laughed at that. They made their way along the wall till they rejoined the other men.

"Yuh might have got a bullet in yuh, an' mebbe it would have served yuh right," was Tilden's compliment to Sharp.

"Mebbe," Sharp agreed, and he did not grin.

Having shot his shaft, Tilden was satisfied.

"What had we better do, Luke?" he asked.

"Curly here wants to take some men and go up the mountain and come on them fellas from behind," Sharp said.

"Man's talk, Curly," Tilden said. "Yuh can go for all of me, and take my blessing with yuh. Yuh will prob'ly need it or somethin' similar. Yuh are goin' up against rifles, y' know."

"Huh," said Curly, "we will get so clost to them that a short gun will be a better friend than seven rifles. Who's a-goin' with me."

They would all have volunteered of course, but when five men got in the words first, the others were silent. They wouldn't embarrass Curly by making him choose from among them. Curly and the five dismounted and made their way back along the mountain wall. Leaning out, the others watched them till they disappeared. They seemed to be gone for a long time, but in reality it was not more than thirty minutes. The others listened for the sound of shots, but there was no such sound. Presently a man staggered into their view, out from the wall.

"Got somebody," Tilden said anxiously.

"Nope," said Sharp. "He just jumped down and he ain't much of a jumper 'less he has got a horse under him."

The other men came into view behind the first. They hurried toward the waiting men, unsteadily on their high heels.

"Shucks," Curly said disappointedly, "there ain't nobody up there. That shelf is as clean as a whistle. What is the layout, Mr. Sharp?"

Curly, because of what he had tried to do, was entitled to an explanation, and Sharp gave it to him as briefly as possible.

"Huh," said Curly, "on'y eight of them. Let us fellas go up that canyon and wipe 'em out."

"And have 'em pick you off," Sharp said. "No, Curly, we got to plan a campaign. We got to figger what them fellas will do."

IN THE end they decided that "them fellas" could do any one of a number of things. Sharp explained about Manly's apparent cleverness, and he voiced the opinion that Manly would not give up the cattle he had rounded up so painstakingly unless he was absolutely forced to do so. It looked, said Sharp, as if all the men had retreated to the bowl where the cattle were being held, but you never could tell what a

crook would do. One thing Sharp was sure of; Manly would strike again as soon as he could. He wouldn't wait for anybody to get into the bowl. All the evidence against him was there.

"That is a good idea, Luke," Tilden agreed. "Manly will guard the canyon."

"The fella that wins this here fight will be the fella that outfoxes the other fella," Sharp declared. "Let us put ourselves in Manly's place. What'd we do if we was in his fix?"

They pondered that for a while, but they didn't arrive anywhere.

"What would Manly figure that we would do?" Tilden asked at last. "Seems to me that is the important question."

"So it is," said Sharp. "Well, look here: don't Manly think we are a lot of numbskulls? He framed up a silly story for me to believe, an'—"

"An' you believed it," Tilden supplied.

"So I did, but I have got my eyes open. I'm tellin' you that Manly will think we will come up the canyon. He will think we are just that stoopid. The thing to do is not to go up the canyon, but to get into that bowl some other way."

"Why," said Curly Randall, "she can be did. This here mountain is hoppity on the other side. There is some trees growin' on shelves. We can go down through them trees and look right into that bowl, I'll bet yuh. Lemme go, Mr. Sharp."

"Me and Tilden has got to be in the forefront of this thing, Curly," Sharp said. "We will divide up. I will take half of Tilden's men and he will take half of mine. Me and my men will go up there to that place Curly speaks of. What you want to do, Bill?"

"Why, go up on the other side," Tilden said. "Take your choice of my men, Luke."

No choosing was necessary. Some men stepped toward Tilden, some toward Sharp, so that they were immediately evenly divided. The horses were left with trailing reins.

"Go on, Curly," Sharp said. "You been up there once. You can show us the way."

They followed Curly and climbed up till they came to a depression in the ridge. They passed through this and Sharp looked down on the formation which Curly had described. Directly below him was one shelf, and trees grew out of what seemed almost to be rock. Led by Sharp, the men let themselves down to this shelf and found themselves screened by the stunted trees.

"Stay here," Sharp ordered.

HE WENT forward among the trees till he was at the last of them. Below him now the mountain side sloped down toward the bowl. No human being was in sight, so far as Sharp could make out, but there were cattle down there, at least five hundred head, Sharp computed. The grass, untouched year after year, was abundant, and the cattle were contentedly feeding, with little movement among them. They were in a cows' paradise, and it occurred to Sharp that Manly was making meat for him and Tilden.

From where he stood he could not see the far end of the bowl, and to bring it into view, he took hold of a tree trunk, far down, and leaned out. He had not looked for more than five seconds when there was the report of a rifle over beyond him, and a bullet went past him, rather close.

Sharp did not dodge back. He wanted that sniper to fire again. Because he had been looking down into the bowl, he did not know where the shot had come from precisely. He had a feeling that the second shot would not hit him, a feeling which had no foundation but which a man often gets in those circumstances. The sniper accommodated him. There was a second report. It came from a clump of trees not more than two hundred feet from Sharp. Because of the position of the sun, this side of that clump was in some shadow, and there was a faint burst of flame there.

The cattleman immediately sized up the situation as he dodged back among the trees. The man was toward the canyon. From his position he could undoubtedly scan the canyon as far as his sight would carry, and he could also take in the surrounding country. Thus he was on guard over the canyon, and he had also been able to catch sight of Sharp.

Sharp immediately moved along through the trees, to work up closer to the man. The trees were small, and he thought he went through them without disturbing them, but he had gone no more than seventy-five feet when a bullet struck a tree just ahead of him. He looked up, and he saw that careful as his progress had been, he had slightly stirred some of the tree tops.

One of them was trembling just visibly even now. That sniper then had good eyes and he was a quick thinker. He had decided that Sharp would work toward him, and he had kept his eyes on those tree tops. Sharp was not to be stopped, however. There was too much at stake. He stooped and continued his progress. Another bullet came into the trees, but this time it was behind Sharp. He knew now that the man was unable to follow his more careful movements.

He came at last to the end of the trees and looked out from among them. What had served the sniper now served him. The man had evidently turned just then to look in another direction. A sapling was bent a little, straightened up, and shivered. Sharp sent a bullet just below the lowest branches. He thought he heard a cry. In any event, though Sharp stepped into the open, there was no more firing. He was sure he had got his man, and he was also sure that that man was alone. He began to work his way cautiously toward that other clump of trees.

CHAPTER VIII

GENTLENESS

HE CAME to the edge of the trees without having been fired upon. His face was grave now. He had seen a great deal of bloodshed, and he wanted to let no man's blood unless he had to. He had a notion now that he had killed a man, and he had a feeling of regret. Whenever he had had to do it he had fought, but the moment the fighting was done, this vague feeling always came to him. He had known all along that if he went through with the battle with Tilden and Tilden's men he would suffer from the same emotion, but what were you going to do when you were pushed beyond the limit?

So sure was he that the man he had fired upon was dead that he paused before he looked in among the trees. He would have been an easy target if the man had been playing 'possum, but he did not think of that. His mind was too full of the other emotion.

A sound brought him up straight, in his hand the hat which he had removed to wipe the sudden sweat from his forehead. That had been the strangest sound that had come to the cattleman's ears in many a day. It was unmistakably the sound of some one crying. Crying! Sharp could not remember when he had seen a man cry, and certainly that was a man in there.

He pushed in among the trees. At his feet lay not a man but a boy. He was not more than seventeen, Sharp was sure. He lay on his right side and he clasped his right shoulder with his left hand. The fingers were bloodstained. The boy's face was white, and his eyes had been closed; but they popped open when he seemed to become aware that some one had arrived. The eyes were very blue, in spite of the cloud of fear and pain that was in them now. The lad's hat had fallen away, and his fair hair was tousled over his head.

Sharp knelt beside him. This man who had fought through a war and had since lived the hard life of the cattle country was now as gentle as any woman could possibly have been.

"What's the matter, son?" Sharp asked. "Did I sting yuh a little?"

"Bullet in my shoulder," the boy said.

"What's your name?"

"Larned."

"You're with that Manly outfit?"

"They made me be with 'em. They picked me up 'way over in Missoury where I lived with my pap. They done took me along with them after a raid. Manly said he would kill me if I didn't do what he said. When he sent me up here, he said I wasn't to come back unless I got my man and come back whole. He said it would be a good idea if I turned my gun on myself if I failed in my job. I was shootin' at you, wasn't I, mister? I had to do it."

"That's all right, son," Sharp soothed him. "There ain't no harm done. I don't think you are bad hurt. You just lemme have a look at that shoulder. Don't you cry no more."

The boy ran his shirt sleeve over his eyes.

"I didn't know I was a-cryin'," he said. "I won't no more. What you all goin' to do with me, mister?"

"Take care of yuh," said Sharp cheerfully.

KNEELING beside the lad, he began to open up his shirt above the wounded shoulder. He had just bared the wound when he heard a sound behind him. He had holstered his gun,

but he went for it with a swiftness which made the boy gasp.

"You there, Mr. Sharp?" came Curly's voice.

"It's me, Curly," Sharp answered.

Curly and the men whom Sharp had left behind crowded in among the trees. They looked silently down at the wounded boy.

"Why, he's a little feller," Curly said. "The pore little son-of-a-gun. Anything we can do, Mr. Sharp?"

"I'll fix him," Sharp said. "Why, son, this ain't much more'n a scratch. Them scratches bleeds like all get out sometimes, but that is a good thing for 'em. Washes out whatever poison may be in 'em. Now I'll just bind this handkerchief around it and it'll be all right. I'll turn you over to Curly here, and he will take care of you. Can you stand?"

He put an arm under Larned's shoulder and Larned got to his feet. He stood looking at Sharp.

"They done sent me up here with a handful of ammanition," he said. "Cuss that Manly, he don't care for nobody."

"You needn't care nothin' about him then," Sharp said softly.

"I don't! I kin talk about him and not be a-betrayin' of nothin'. I'll tell you all. They is a man other side of the canyon, keepin' lookout same as I was doin' here. The rest of the men is guardin' the canyon at its other end, six of them, I think. Manly is down in the bowl. He has got a place fixed up for himself in a kinda of a cave at the far side. He ain't takin' no chances for himself. He has got three horses down there all ready, so if one should be shot he will have two left. You go an' git him, mister."

"I'll git him," Sharp agreed. "Curly, how about you takin' this little fella back down where there won't be no excitement? Come now, Curly. It is a good enough job for any man."

"I'll do it," Curly said, and it was as great a sacrifice as he had ever made. "Come along, son. Your troubles are over. Mr. Sharp an' all of us will take care of you from now on."

When Curly and Larned had left, Sharp faced the men.

"Boys," he said soberly, "we started out to have a scrap amongst ourselves. It was a silly matter. Then we found we had a real scrap on our hands. Looks to me like the scrap gets realer an' realer every minute. Why, this fella Manly stole that little fella away from his home. We will make Manly pay for that. Course cows is cows an' we will git our cows back, but we will put in a lick for that boy on the side. Huh?"

"Sever'l licks," a man said. And "you betcha," the rest chimed in.

"We will go over and pay our respects to them fellas that think they are on guard," Sharp said. "Come on."

They started but they had taken only a few steps when they stopped, in a listening attitude. There had been a shot over beyond the canyon. Sharp laughed.

"Bill Tilden has shot a rustler," he said. "I know the bark of his gun."

A ripple of merriment went through the men. By gosh, they would make a picnic of this thing.

CHAPTER IX

THE PICNIC

BILL TILDEN, they presently discovered, had done more than shoot a man, if indeed he had shot a man. He had attracted the attention of the men who were guarding the end of the canyon.

After much traveling down slopes and up slopes and across flat tables, Sharp and his men came to a table bigger than the others. It projected out over the canyon in a semicircle, and Sharp saw that from it the men who lay there could command a view of a good deal of the canyon.

He believed they must have heard Larned's rifle shots and if it had not been for the shot beyond the canyon, they would undoubtedly have been looking in the direction from which Sharp and the other men had come. That single shot of Tilden's or one of his men seemed to have confused them. They were now directing their attention toward the place from which it had come, so far as they could determine that place. They lay at full length, their rifles at their sides, the barrels projecting beyond their heads. The right hand of each man lay on the rifle stock. The men unquestionably were ready for business.

Sharp saw that Comstock, the man whom they had captured below, had lied a little about the number of men that Manly had. Comstock himself was one, Larned was another, and if Tilden had captured a man he

made the third. If many were down in the bowl, he was the fourth. Sharp counted eight of these men. That made an even dozen at least.

However, a man or two more made no particular difference. The capture of these ought to be easy. The men now stood among trees, and they were not more than a hundred feet from the sprawled men. Between the two parties there were no trees. The table was flat, bare, rocky, with no hint of vegetation of any kind on it. Sharp decided that he would have to rush the men. If he and his own men stepped from their concealment and ordered the others to surrender, they might not surrender. They might whirl about with those rifles and begin shooting. If they saw a party suddenly descending upon them, the confusion from which they already suffered might grow.

"Everybody ready?" Sharp asked.

The men nodded grimly. Their "picnic" faces were grave now. There was death in the air here if those men did not yield.

"Come on, then," Sharp ordered.

He stepped out into the open and the men came out abreast of him. They could not rush out like that on the bare rock soundlessly, and the men at the rim seemed immediately to hear them. They jerked their heads around, and Sharp saw their staring eyes and their hot, frowning faces. He brought up his gun and sent a bullet over the head of one of the men. That man flattened himself, but the shot, instead of adding to the confusion of the others, was like a call to action. With feet and hands they propelled themselves about on their stomachs, so that their heads were toward the oncoming men. Their rifles were pointed at these.

"Let 'em have it," Sharp called. "Don't kill anybody if you can help it."

He aimed along the right side of the man he had selected, and he had the satisfaction of seeing that he had creased him. His right arm went limp. The rifle fell on the rock. The other man had fired, too, and three of the bullets took effect. One bullet took deadly effect. A man rose to his knees and hands and then swiftly dropped down. His face struck the rock and he slid forward a little, shivered, and lay still.

Those who had not been hit returned the fire. A rifle bullet struck one of Sharp's men in the shoulder. He spun halfway around, and then sat down, a foolish grin on his lips. Two men stopped to take care of him.

Sharp and his men were now two thirds of the way to the other men. The fight had been taken out of these. They flung down their rifles and sprang to their feet. They did not at once raise their hands. The desire for escape was too strongly upon them. They looked back but only the yawning canyon was there. They looked to one side and to the other, but no avenue of escape offered. Then they fronted the punchers, and at last their hands went up.

BY NOW Sharp and the punchers were close to them. They stopped and eyed them. They were a nondescript crew. They were poorly dressed, unwashed, unshaven. Eyes were red, probably from lack of sleep. Sharp supposed that Manly had forced them to take long watches in numbers sufficient not only to guard the canyon but to put up a fight if that became necessary.

Also if the outfit had got anything out of its raids, these men had apparently not shared in it. Sharp supposed that Manly was one of those raiders who promised much and gave little. He would string them along, telling them that there would be a division before long, and then he would desert them, travel, and form another organization. Sharp had heard of that trick being played by a man who was a little smarter than the men he picked up.

These men were stupid enough. Their eyes were bleak now, and their mouths were dropped open. Their bodies sagged as if from weariness, to which was added a sodden realization that they were caught. Running his eyes over the men, Sharp found one who still seemed a little more assertive than the others. All the spirit had not died out of him. There was a little fight left in him apparently, for a glint of anger came into his eyes as Sharp stared hard at him. Sharp went up to him briskly.

"You're in charge of this outfit, ain't you?" Sharp asked.

"What if I am?"

The tone was not so belligerent as the glint in the eyes had led the cattleman to believe it would be. He saw that it would not take much to break this man. He was more resentful at having fallen down on his

job than anything else. One quick, sharp blow at his faint stubbornness seemed to be necessary.

Sharp beckoned two of his men to him, though he did not take his eyes from the outlaw's face.

"You been lookin' down into that canyon, haven't you?" Sharp asked.

"Why, yes," the man answered in surprise.

"How far yuh think it is to the bottom?"

"I dunno. Pretty far."

With a faint smile on his lips, Sharp stared hard into the man's eyes. He wanted him to guess what his purpose was. He wanted to let terror sink into his dull brain. But the man seemed unable to guess. He met Sharp's gaze for a moment, and then he let his eyes travel over the faces of the other men. When the eyes came at length to Sharp's face again, Sharp shrugged his shoulder and made a gesture of sudden decision.

"Throw him over the rim," he said.

Two men advanced on the other and seized him and hoisted him aloft. They held him there for a moment. In that moment the man seemed frozen with horror. He was rigid in the hands of the punchers. Then a scream broke from his lips.

"Don't," he pleaded thickly. "Don't! What yuh want? What can I do for yuh?"

Sharp signaled the men to let him down and they dropped him none too gently.

"Where's Manly?" Sharp demanded.

"In his hole over there at the other side of the bowl," the man answered.

"Alone?"

The man hesitated but only briefly. He seemed to see that only the naked truth would save him now.

"Alone," he answered.

"Ready to make his getaway?"

"Yeah, ready."

"Playin' you fellas for a lot of cussed fools."

"Fools!"

The man breathed the word as if he had been suddenly enlightened as to the unfairness of Manly's dealings with him and his fellows. He turned toward the bowl, nearly all of which could now be seen from this position.

"Manly's hole is over yonder," he said. "It's on this side at the far end. He has got horses there, all ready for him at any minute."

"He could have heard the shots?"

"Shore he could, but how would he know how the fightin' comes out? Yuh called us fools, an' I guess we be. But Manly thinks all you cowmen is fools, too. He ain't got nothin' but a sneer for yuh, and it ain't no polite sneer. He thinks he is as good as half a dozen of yuh. He will fight till he drops, too."

Sharp believed that. He had known that brazen, conceited kind of outlaw before.

"He must be a good man to have handled all of yuh like he done," the cattleman said. "Why didn't yuh figger him out better?"

"Fools yuh called us," the man repeated. "Fools we be. He picked us up, he dragged us along, he made promises. I can see now he never meant to keep no promises, but yuh can see things sometimes when yuh can't see 'em other times. Why don't yuh go down there an' get Manly?"

"Which is exactly what I am goin' to do," Sharp retorted. "How can he get out of that bowl except through this canyon?"

"See what looks like a shadder over there in the corner?" the raider asked.

Sharp nodded.

"Sun's off'n it now. Looks like a shadder on the rock. It's a draw. Manly can get out that way."

"He'll have to cross the bowl then?"

"Yeah."

Sharp reloaded his gun deliberately. He put it lightly in its holster, and then he turned to his men.

"Stay where you are," he said coolly. "I'm goin' to pay this Manly person a visit."

CHAPTER X

IN THE BOWL

THE men showed their disappointment in their faces. They would have liked to go scampering down the slope to be in on the capture of Manly, but they recognized the justice of Sharp's position. Manly was one person; Sharp was another. Sharp was a law-abiding cattleman. Manly was an outlaw, a skunk that wandered here and there making trouble for his betters. Did it take a posse to capture such a fellow? Hardly! Sharp could do it by himself.

Sharp moved along the rim, keeping his eyes on the bowl. The grazing cows had

moved to the right-hand end of the bowl, leaving the other end empty of them. From what the man had said Sharp judged that Manly's retreat was at his left hand, while the draw was just opposite him. Manly might do one of two things: He might mount one of the fast horses which the man had said were ready, and dash across the bowl in a vainglorious attempt to ride openly to freedom; or he might skulk around the bowl keeping in the growing shadow there as much as possible. Sharp had a notion that he would make the dash. It would be in keeping with what Sharp had judged to be his character.

It was a stiff descent which Sharp now had to make. More than half its length downward the mountainside was a series of rocky shelves. The walls which rose from these shelves were in some cases higher than Sharp even when he hung down by his hands. Once or twice he had to drop a foot from overhang to the narrow floor. He had to drop to his hands and knees, too, for he knew that if he landed on his feet he might fall backward over the next rim. He was fifteen minutes in negotiating these shelves. Then there was a slope of fifty feet directly down to the floor of the bowl.

He stopped to get his breath, for he was not so young as he had once been. He stared out over the bowl, and then his eyes came to the shadow which the man had said was the mouth of a draw. That mouth defined itself now, at this nearer distance, and he saw that it was a narrow opening, a mere slit in the rocky wall. It was just about wide enough, he judged, to permit the free passage of one man on horseback.

Sharp was just about to withdraw his eyes from it and continue his downward way, when he saw a horseman emerge from the draw. At first sight of this rider, Sharp's hand went to the butt of his gun. He did not draw the gun, however. His hand resting on the butt, he stood and stared.

"Why, there's Tilden," he gasped. "The old son-of-a-gun! He got the same information I did, and he has ridden around there and come through that draw. Why, the pore ol' fool is a fair target for Manly now. Ain't he got no sense a-tall?"

Evidently Tilden had no sense a-tall. He sat his big horse and calmly cast his eyes over the bowl. He sat in his saddle easily. He seemed not to be in the least excited, though he must have known that a desperate man, armed with a rifle, was across from him.

Apparently Manly had been watching. He had hidden in his hole and had heard the sounds of battle. He had of course no means of knowing how the battle was going, but from what the man had said he would not dream that it could go against his men. A bunch of cowmen get the better of an outfit that Manly had picked for their ruthlessness? Huh! That, Sharp was sure, would be the way the raider would reason.

Whatever the radier's reasoning had been, he went into action swiftly enough. There was a rifle report from the spot at which Sharp had calculated Manly was hidden. He saw Tilden duck involuntarily. Tilden's gun came out, and he returned the fire.

"Get back, you fool!" Sharp screamed.

IT WAS not possible, he supposed, that Tilden heard him from this distance, but Tilden might as well have heard him; for the old boy turned his horse and dashed back into the draw as there was another report from this side of the bowl.

"Now, that is sweet," Sharp told himself contentedly. "Ol' Tilden proves hisself every now and then. He is guardin' the draw, and Manly can't get out that way. It is my job to get down to the mouth of that canyon. Then we will have Mr. Manly sewed up in a bag. We can take our time with him."

He was too precipitous in carrying out his design. Instead of holding his body back, he started down the slope in an almost erect position. The slope proved to be of a formation that yielded beneath his feet. His feet slipped from under him, and he went rolling and sliding to the bottom. Only a tight, instinctive grip on his gun saved it from being wrenched from his hand.

He was rolling so fast when he came to the bottom of the slope that he was carried ten feet out into the open. Bruised and shaken though he was, he scrambled to his feet and faced in the direction of Manly's hiding place.

Manly had apparently realized his danger at last, and some of his brazenness had deserted him. Mounted on a sleek horse, a thin-legged animal that came forward with a prancing step against the bit and with

slender head upflung, Manly was making his way cautiously toward the mouth of the canyon. Knowing that his way of escape through the draw was cut off, he was going to attempt the only other passage. He seemed to be aware now that the battle might have gone against his men, and he was concerned only with his own safety.

Sharp at once, without thought of his own danger, began to run toward the canyon's mouth. Immediately Manly caught sight of him. He dropped his reins and without stopping the horse, he brought his rifle to his shoulder. He fired instantly and the bullet sped past Sharp. Sharp threw a bullet at the upright figure. He too, missed.

There was then the clatter of hoofs on the floor of the bowl, near the draw. The clatter died at once as Tilden's horse came out into the matted grass. Both Manly and Sharp had heard the sound, however, and it caused Manly to turn in his saddle. For a moment he appeared to be confused. He seemed not to know whether to continue to fire on Sharp or to give his attention to the advancing rider. Sufficient time elapsed for Tilden to draw near to him.

Manly suddenly brought his rifle up with the intention on firing on Tilden. He was too slow, however. As he had turned toward Tilden in his saddle, Sharp had brought his gun up. Sharp now fired. Tilden fired at the same time.

Manly's rifle dropped from his hands. He swayed in the saddle, far to the right. With a mighty effort he brought his body back. He swayed again, from one side to the other, and then, clutching at nothing, he toppled to the ground. The horse shied away from him and brought up against the rocky wall. It stood there, trembling, its head turned toward the man on the ground.

Sharp broke into a run and Tilden came forward at a lope. Horse and man on foot reached Manly at the same time. Tilden flung himself down, and the two cowmen stood above the prostrate body.

"He's dead," Sharp said gravely. "Less not look him over, Bill. We'll just say that we both got him. He owed a big debt, this fella. He done a rank injustice to a pore little fella that Curly Randall is lookin' after."

"A pore little fella," said Tilden blankly. "Why, lookit them cows he was about to drive away from here."

"Yeah," said Sharp absently. "Cows!"

"Are you out of your head?" Tilden demanded.

"Nope. Say, what was that shot you fired over the canyon?"

"Oh, I just creased a fella an' he told me about this here Manly."

"Same thing happened to me," Sharp said. "You didn't lose no time."

"You have busted yourself some," Tilden said.

"Rolled down hill. Quickest way to get down. Had no time to lose."

He raised his gun and fired it three times.

"That'll bring the boys down," he said. "Them cows is beginnin' to look restless."

"What is it about this pore little fella?" Tilden asked.

Sharp told him.

"I am goin' to send that young 'un home in style," said Sharp.

"So'm I."

"Long as you keep to my style it'll be all right," Sharp said.

CHAPTER XI

ANOTHER BATTLE

SHARP and Tilden were jogging along toward Sharp's ranch. Curly had gone on ahead of them with Larned. Several of the punchers were herding the prisoners ahead of them. Manly and the other outlaw lay in shallow graves in the bowl. Other punchers had been left to watch the cattle. Sharp and Tilden had decided that the cows might as well benefit by the pasture that the outlaws had driven them to. Supplies would be sent up to the men.

"Luke," Tilden said, "did you really think that I was tryin' to get Curly Randall drunk that time just to make trouble for you?"

"Certainly I did," Sharp answered stoutly. "I seen you feedin' him liquor. What was I to suppose?"

"Yuh know better now?"

"Yuh lookin' for a scrap?" Sharp demanded.

"Why, I ain't never run away from one," Tilden retorted. "If I hadn't happened out of that draw when I did, I dunno what would have become of yuh. Yuh would prob'ly not have a scrap left in yuh."

Sharp looked between his horse's ears, a

habit he had when he wanted to make up his mind.

"Well, I'll tell yuh, Bill," he said at last. "I come near bein' all kinds of a fool. I apologize for thinkin' wrong of yuh. I'm glad my boys an' yours didn't mix it. Now, yuh poor fish, if that don't satisfy yuh, go an' hire a man to apologize to yuh."

"I had a privit apology comin' to me an' I was goin' to get it," Tilden said serenely. "Public apologies ain't no good. Makin' 'em, a man may just be hangin' a bluff."

"Well, that fella Manly was pretty slick," Sharp said. "I asked Larned about Ridenour and he said that one night when he was gettin' Manly's supper, Ridenour came in, and Manly framed up that he was to go to town and tell Simmons that crazy story about you bein' a rustler. We swallered that story whole, Bill."

"Me?" Tilden cried. "Why, I never swallered that story or any other. It was you that did the swallerin' and it is a wonder you didn't choke. Why, I would have seen through that thing at one glance."

"All right!" Sharp cried, in his turn. "You are the smartest man four hundred miles from Big Creek, all four ways. That suit you?"

Tilden grinned. He looked as if he were suited. For a while the creak of saddle leather only. Then said Tilden:

"Luke, do you remember that cavalry engagement at Ashby's Gap on June 14, 1863?"

"I 'member it," Sharp answered absently.

Tilden looked at him. He couldn't get a rise out of him on that. So he went on—and this had always been a winner:

"What I'm sayin' is that Meade was a damn' sight better soldier than Hooker ever dared to be.

"Meade?" Sharp roared.

And the battle was on. It lasted till they came in sight of Sharp's place. But it was of no consequence. They could safely fight again those old battles, for they were always better friends afterward.

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By John Dudley Phelps

A TRICK lion, eh? You say you saw a lion in a movie show pull the clothes off the vill'in, take the papers and so save the hero-ine and her pa from the poorhouse? Shucks, that ain't nothin'! I'll tell you 'bout a lion what pulled off a real estate deal. Now, you listen a whole lot.

You know Jib Collum? That little, dried-up prospector, browned and wrinkled by years of desert suns and with a long, rusty beard hung to his chin and bushy hair every which way under his sombrero? Faded blue eyes, you know, the color of his overalls which with leather boots and a wool shirt was all the clothes he wore. Yes, and there's Gravy, a small mouse-toned burro that's always with him. A pair of jacks, hey? Don't fool yourself none; aces-up, boy, aces-up.

Well, come summer and Jib just like a banker craves a vacation. He decides he'll crawl up some cool mount'in and lie under the pines and sniff 'em and loaf and plan further prospectin' trips. He knew just the place where he could be comfortable and look over the desert map-wise and be blame glad he wasn't down there sweltering. Him and Gravy set out and 'long about sundown the third day he come to Tin Can Well, a good water hole where the foothills start to rise up from the desert. Away off, up and yonder he could see Deer Ridge, blue with pines, where he was headed for. He was thinkin' how nice it was goin' to be to lie around, smell the pines, hear the water bubble from Deer Spring and dream there under the murmuring trees. He slid through the willows that ring Tin Can Well and pulled up short.

On the cleared space near the water hole was a fire big enough and hot enough to roast a beef and, about it, danced two young fellers dabbin' things on the ends of long sticks at it. In the middle of the fire was a coffee-pot bilin' and steamin' like a' infant volcano. Jib saw the two young chaps were tryin' to cook and the things they were wavin' at the fire was their dinner. Both of 'em wore the kind of clothes you see advertised for the great outdoors, shirts open at the throat, fluffy knee pants and long socks with lightning jags of color all over 'em.

One of the young fellers wore a bright handkerchief about his neck and his hair was pretty long. This one shields his face with one hand against the heat of the

flames. Then the grub—it looked like a small steak—burned off from the end of the stick. He let out a sob, plunked down on the ground and began to cry. The other lad drops his stick, grub and all, rushes over to the sufferer and tries to comfort him.

"B-BUT it—it's the s-second time," wails the one with the handkerchief and howls louder than ever.

"There, there," soothes the other one, putting his arms around the handkerchief. "Never mind, Lou, sweet—"

"Hee-haw!" brays Gravy.

The two young fellers spin about. "Oh!" says the one with the handkerchief, while the other just stands and grins. Jib sees the one with the handkerchief ain't a he at all, but a she. Jib steps up and the young feller meets him, holds out a hand and says pleasantly, "I'm Bill Travert and this is Mrs. Travert."

They were both hardly more'n kids and their faces were fresh and rosy for they hadn't been on the desert long enough to get sunburned.

" 'Spose we eat," suggests Jib.

At that, both the kids busts out laughing.

"We been tryin' to," says Bill. "This is the first camp we've been on our own hook. Before this, we stopped at auto camps and everything was fixed for us, stoves and wood and all that."

Jib showed them how to rig a fire between two rows of stones without wastin' wood or heat. While the fire was blazin', he boiled the coffee and when the fuel had burned to coals it was ready for the fryin' pan. The young folks took in every movement Jib made and they wouldn't allow the old-timer to contribute any of his supplies. Some feed they had, too.

When the dishes had been washed, Jib allowed them the luxury of a small camp fire which they all sat around and talked. The kids chattered about their home town, the places they'd been on their trip and how grand the desert was. He asked 'em how they come to wander out there. Well, they'd never been on the desert before and, besides—here the girl pipes up—"We want a mountain lion."

"A which!" gasps Jib.

"A mountain lion, you know, the great California mountain lion."

"It's like this," explains Bill. "We weren't going to tell anybody, but we'll tell you. Lou and I have just been married and we're on our honeymoon."

"You'd never guess, would you?" bubbles Lou.

"No," says Jib, "not since you asked your husband how much sugar and you forgot if he took cream. How about this lion? Seems to me a varmint like that would be a handicap to any household. Why not start with a nice little pussy cat, a white one maybe?"

"Oh, but Daddy, we don't want it in our home; we want it in—in our business."

"Business! That's the last thing I figger you two doin', lion tamin'!"

"Oh, but we don't!"

"I—I give up," says Jib.

"You see," goes on Bill, "our town has started a zoo and one of the patrons has offered two hundred dollars for a good, healthy specimen of mountain lion. We rather wanted that two hundred dollars."

"For first payment on a bungaloo," chatters Lou. "You just ought to see that bungaloo, Daddy. The living-room is Tiffany and the breakfast nook is blue and the bath is white tile and the kitchen is just—" and she squeals with delight.

"You don't want to go on like that," advises Jib, "or they'll boost the price on ye." He turns to Bill: "How are you equipped?"

"We got a cage on our car for the lion," says Lou.

"And a trap," says Bill.

"Let's look 'em over."

NOT far off among the willows stood the car which was one of them delivery kind with heavy wire screens on both sides. Bill had partitioned off a space with flat, iron bars wired together and made a door at the back.

"What do you think?"

"Won't our lion look cute in there, Daddy?"

"Um," says Jib, "guess it might do for a stuffed lion."

Then the babes in the wood was mighty put out. They'd worked hard over that cage, they had, and Bill couldn't get out 'cause Lou locked him in there and he tried. And, if Bill couldn't make the grade, what chance had a' overgrown kitty-cat?

"Well," remarks Jib, "considerin' a mounting lion is built mostly of steel springs and

rawhide he's goin' to do some rarin' and something is sure goin' to bust and it ain't goin' to be Mr. Lion. Anyhow, you got to catch him first."

"Here's our trap," says Bill pullin' it out of the car.

Jib glances at it and shakes his head. "Mounting lions ain't caught in traps," he tells 'em, "'cept by accident and not at all in ones like that."

Bill looks like a kid Santa Claus forgot. Lou rushes to him and throws her arms about his neck. "We can't have our bungalooboohoo," she wails.

Jib felt pretty bad. He didn't want to dishearten those kids and he didn't want them to get their hopes all set and then be disappointed. It was much better, he figgered, to tell 'em the truth and try to help 'em. They all went back to the fire and Jib told what he knew 'bout mounting lions. Lions weren't found on the desert 'cept as a' occasional stray. They ranged the deer country where there was green feed and water for the deer which was their natural food. The best way to catch 'em was to have dogs tree 'em and then they could be lassoed or shot down. Traps weren't any good 'cause a lion was perticular and wanted to kill his own grub; he wasn't satisfied with anything left lyin' 'round.

"Well," says Bill after thinkin' quite a while. "I'd like a whirl at a lion after coming this—"

"Oh, Daddy," breaks in Lou, "won't you help us get one?"

"Sure, I will," promises Jib, "though I don't figger I'm equal to treein' one and yankin' it off its perch barehanded. Let's see now. You come in by the foothill road?"

"Yes."

"Four, five mile back, do you remember a small house and a red windmill with a lot of cotton-woods?"

"Yes."

"That's Willet's. Willet come in San Berinyo as I was leavin' and told me he wouldn't be back for a week, that's three or four days more. You camp here that long and I'll give you a letter to Willet. I've done favors for him an' he'll do one for me. I'll ask him to go with you and take his dogs which are trained for huntin' mounting lions. We'll all meet at the foot of Deer Ridge trail and then we'll see 'bout Mr. Lion. I don't promise one, now, but we'll try. How does that strike you?"

"Grand, Daddy, just grand. We're sure to catch one."

Bill nodded and grinned.

"I'll start out in the mornin' and get camp ready. You can drive almost to the foot of the trail where I'll meet you and take your chuck on Gravy up to camp. 'Spose we turn in."

At breakfast, Jib showed the youngsters how to mix and bake real flapjacks, not the rubbery kind a feller has to pry apart, no sir; but brown spotty ones, same thickness all the way over and tender— Oh, my! Jib's one artist at flapjacks. When Jib was packed up and ready to start, Lou come trottin' up, carrying a good-sized roll of canvas wrapped 'round with a lot of rope. She holds it out to Jib and says, "It's for you."

"For me?" asks Jib surprised. "What is it?"

"A tent."

"W-what for? I ain't a circus."

"Why to sleep in, of course. Think how nice and comfy you'll be all tucked in. I made it and Bill and I thought you'd like it. You cut limbs for the poles. You haven't one, you know, and, really, we'll be here such a short time we won't need it."

Jib saw he was goin' to hurt the little girl's feelin's if he refused her gift; but, shucks, he didn't need a tent any more'n a jack rabbit needs ear muffs. Besides, it meant a' extra load for Gravy. He took the tent and acted as if he'd craved such all his life. Everybody grinned and was happy. The kids thanked him for all he'd taught 'em 'bout campin'. Jib said he would expect 'em and Willet in four days at the foot of Deer Ridge trail. After a few more good-bys, he was on his way! That tent bothered Jib. He could see himself tearin' 'round ten-thousand acres of desert lookin' for tent poles.

JIB went on up the foothills which near the desert were dried and barren and brown; but, after a bit, he left the cactus behind and come to scrub oak and heavy chaparral, then live oak and sycamore in the canyon bottoms. And 'long in early afternoon, he saw the first pine, a stunted, twisted runt of a tree. Jib bruised some needles in his fingers and sniffed the scent; he was hungry for the pines, pluggin' along, pluggin' along, he come finally to the foot of Deer Ridge trail where he was to meet the lion hunters in a few days.

Here Deer Ridge rose right up in a mighty, sky-clamberin' cliff and beside it, followin' a steep ravine, the trail angled back and forth and up from ledge to point to ledge again and always up and steeper 'til it seemed as if a feller would go dizzy with twistin' and fall plumb off and go squash on the rocks below. Shucks, that trail come near bein' a ladder. Well, Jib and Gravy went at it and up, puffin' and pantin' and stoppin' to rest every dozen twists or so. Gravy was heavy laden and Jib didn't urge her. They climbed and twisted and climbed some more. Of course all trails have a' end. At the top, Jib took the pack off'n the burro and sprawled out on the pine needles to rest.

It was just 'bout sundown when Jib finished makin' camp and ate his supper. Then he had a chance to look 'round. He stood on a small bench, platter shaped, that lay between a higher rise of Deer Ridge and the cliff that dropped straight down hundreds and hundreds of feet. He could see way over the pines below to the oak clad foothills farther down and farther to where the foothills come down into the desert all furrowed by arroyos and humped with wind-blown sand and streaked and mottled with gray-green chaparral and on and wide the desert reached to become smooth in distance, finally stretchin' away to mountings which jigsawed the sky at world's end.

The sun, dropping down, changed from copper to gold to red, hung flattenin' a moment over the western mountings then plunked from sight; but the glory of it stayed on mounting top and painted, too, the ragged clouds a pinky red that deepened to crimson as the shadows on the far mountings turned from blue to purple. Then the color faded from everything 'cept the sky and that was blue velvet, deep blue, you know. Peeped out a timid star, more of 'em and more yet 'til the whole sky was thick with 'em twinklin' white and green and red and vi'let, maybe. The pines behind Jib begun to murmur with the breeze that took the night coolness to the desert an' with it came the "hoo-hoo-oo" of some questionin' owl.

Jib intended to lie in his blankets and listen to the pines and smell 'em, but he no more got stretched out than he was asleep. He woke with the sun full on his face. That made him mad for he had some important loafin' to do and wanted all day to do it in. After breakfast, he happened to notice the tent Lou had given him. He unrolled it and found it wasn't a tent, leastwise it wasn't the kind he knew about bein' simply a large square of canvas with eyelets at the corners and in between and in each eyelet was tied a long rope. Jib couldn't figger it out. He twisted the thing this way and that, dragged it about and turned it inside out, but he couldn't git the savvy of it. He cut some saplings for poles and fiddled with 'em, but it did no good. So, he just give up. He gathered all the rope ends together and knotted 'em so they wouldn't get tangled. One corner rope was much longer than the others and trailed 'way below the knot. He left the contraption feelin' pretty mad and went over near the edge of the cliff to begin his loafin' which he kept up all day.

HE WAS sittin' there at dusk, thinkin' how pleasant it all was, when of a sudden something rubbed against his back. Jib glanced about, tumbled over, turned a summersault that landed him on the edge of the cliff and scrambled away on hands and knees as fast as he could. What rubbed up against him was a mounting lion! Yes, sir, it was. A reddish, tawny beast 'bout two foot high and twice as long, with a tail long as itself. The big cat perked up its rounded ears and looked surprised with its big, yellow eyes at Jib. Jib just sat and gawked back.

He didn't know what to do for he'd never been chummy with mounting lions, but he figgered it was safer to ease along over where his ax lay. He started to hunch along the ground, stoppin' innocent-like now and then to chew a pine needle or just sit. The lion come along too, rubbin' itself on Jib's back as friendly as you please. Well, after a bit, he saw the critter was gentle and not inclined to get rough any. He sat there tryin' to figger out how the lion got that way; whether it was somebody's pet which had snook back to the woods, or, maybe, it was just young and foolish and didn't know any better. The catamount give a' extra hard rub and nearly toppled Jib over, so to save himself he flung out a' arm which landed about the lion's neck and he felt there a thin, leather strap. He fooled with this and found attached to the collar a metal tag which from the roughness of it might have writin' on it, but it was dark

and Jib didn't want to get his face too close to the lion's chops.

"Nice kitty," says Jib, rubbin' the critter's back.

The catamount stiffens up and begins to purr like a buzz saw cuttin' white pine. Then Jib made ready to turn in. He arranged his blankets and took off his boots. Well, he had an awful time for the lion insisted on gettin' in bed with him. In the first place there wasn't room for both of 'em, and anyhow, Jib didn't want a catamount for a bedfeller. He'd no more'n slide in between the blankets when the lion would come crowdin' in head first behind him and Jib would be squeezed out like a pea from its pod. After wrastlin' thataway for a while, Jib give up and lay half out of his blankets with that blame cat purr-purrin' and snuggling close to him. That animal was hot, too. Shucks, he couldn't sleep at all and he kept gettin' madder an' madder, but he dassn't get rough with that lion. After a while, the varmit quit treadin' Jib's back with its feet, the purr stopped and Jib knew the beast was asleep. He waited until he was good and sure, inched out of the blankets and crept over to the tent thing Lou had given him and rolled up in that. He'd come up there to lie awake and sniff the pines and instead he'd been shooed out of bed by a fool mounting lion.

He got up early in the morning, long before the sun was, but the lion was up, too, and came prancin' over and rubbed against him. Jib wanted to see what was on the metal tag so he petted the critter and took hold of the collar. "Henry," was all that was on the tag.

"Run off and play, Hen," says Jib givin' him a shove.

'Bout that time, Gravy wanders into camp. Henry sees her, gives a flip of his tail and capers to her, thinkin', maybe, he's found another little playmate. Gravy sees him comin' and stands watchin' the cat with her ears pricked forward. Henry puts out a friendly paw. Gravy whirls, lashes out with her hind feet and lands on Henry's ribs—biff—biff—and knocks him tail over teakettle.

"Mi-i-iaaaw-spitz," howls Henry, clutchin' at the ground.

"He-ee-aw-haw," brays Gravy, tryin' to jump on him with her sharp, little front hoofs.

Henry scrambles away, bounds over and gets behind Jib, peerin' out at Gravy. It was quite plain Gravy wasn't goin' to stand for any foolishness from a mounting lion. After that Henry gave the burro lots of room and, every time she come near, he sneaked behind Jib for protection.

JIB was cookin' breakfast and had just flipped a flapjack into air when Henry rubbed against him, makin' him miss the flapjack on the fall. He was pretty much peeved and, with Gravy's example afore him, he hauled off to give Henry a swift kick in the ribs. Henry thought it was a new game, met the kick with a paw and one claw caught in the boot top. Jib, fryin' pan and all, come down atop Henry who put both front paws 'round Jib's neck and commenced to lick his face. It felt like coarse sandpaper to Jib. He batted Henry on the snoot with the hot fryin' pan and managed to break away.

Henry was the lovin'est critter that ever lived. As a tagger, he had Mary's little lamb rooted to the spot. Jib couldn't make a move without Henry rubbin' against him, gettin' in his way or tryin' to walk between his feet. Yes, sir, that catamount kept getting more an' more affectionate. He took to standin' on his hind legs and puttin' his front paws on Jib's shoulders so he could lick his face. Jib went to Gravy for help; but, what with the cat loving him on one side and, on the other, the burro tryin' to kick the stuffin' out of the cat, it was no go. He took to the trees or tried to. But was he let alone? He was not. He swarmed up a sapling he figgered would bear his weight. Henry gave a bound, the sapling busted and rock-a-by baby on the tree top! Jib had the satisfaction of lightin' on Henry and knockin' his wind out. There was a subdued cat around there for a while, but he recovered in time to make dinner a combination jugglin' and dodgin' match. The only reason Jib didn't try to choke that varmit to death with condensed milk or boot him over the cliff was he wanted to give him to Bill and Lou so they could have their bungalooboohoo.

Next day, Henry sprung a new trick. Every time Jib laid down whatever he was handlin', Henry picked it up in his mouth and tagged around with it. If Jib picked up something else, Henry dropped what he was packin' and come over to get that. Jib was pretty near loco between

retrievin' his stuff and sidesteppin' Henry's lovin' carcass. He give up tryin' to have a good time sniffin' the pines and lookin' out over the desert. He just mooned around on the bench, pickin' up after the cat, actin' as rubbin' block for that blamed cat-amount and listenin' to all nine of him purr 'til he felt as if his throat was full of fur.

THEN come the morning he was to meet the lion hunters at the foot of the trail. He didn't know what to do with Henry. He couldn't take him for Willet's dogs wouldn't know he was a tame cat; besides, he wanted to surprise Bill and Lou. He didn't know what to do. For the third time that morning he took the fryin' pan away from Henry and put it back on the fireplace. He noticed the tent Lou had given him and was sorry he didn't savvy enough to set it up. He went over to it, Henry taggin' along, and straightened out the canvas. The ropes from the eyelets were still gathered in the knot he had tied. He picked up the long rope that extended below the knot and idly swung the end of it back and forth.

"Guess it'll take four Philadelphia lawyers and Sam Lloyd to puzzle this out, Henry," he says, droppin' the rope across the lion's back.

He walks off and then hears a whimper. He turns and Henry stands with the rope over his back, lookin' at Jib pleadingly.

"Come here, Henry," says Jib thinkin' of something.

Henry whimpers, but doesn't move.

Then Jib figgers that whoever tamed that cat taught him to stay hitched. Jib went back, took the rope and made a loop with a good cinch knot that wouldn't slip around Henry's chest. It wouldn't have been any good 'round the neck for that was larger than the head. Jib took a couple of half hitches with one of the other ropes around a low stump and that, he thought, would keep Henry there and also hold the canvas from blowing. That was fine. He could bring the young couple to camp and show 'em their lion.

Early that morning, a breeze sprung up and blew stronger as day went on. Jib knew from the set of it, there would be sand storms on the desert and he was mighty glad he wasn't out there. It didn't take him and Gravy long to hoof it down the trail. There at the bottom was just Bill and Lou waitin' for him. Jib looks at 'em.

"Well, Mr. and Mrs. Gloom, I'm glad to see you, but what's chewin' on you? Don't you know it's a cinch to catch a lion 'round these parts?"

"It wouldn't do us any good," says Bill sadly.

"No?"

"You see," says Lou, tryin' to smile and not makin' it. "The zoo all burned up."

"No! Who told you?"

"Mr. Willet sent you a paper and Bill read about it."

"I see. So havin' no place to put Mr. Lion he didn't come."

"Yes, that's it," confirms Bill. "He sent regards to you and said any time we could use 'em, he'd catch a corralful of lions for us. Since the zoo burned, a lion wouldn't do us any good. Our zoo is poor and it will be a long time, years maybe, before it is built up again." And he tries to laugh, but don't have luck.

"Oh," utters Jib and he becomes as sad as the others thinkin' of the lost bungaloo-boohoo and thinkin', too, of the wonderful time he's got cut out gettin' rid of that Henry lion. Tears start in his eyes.

"There, there, Daddy," soothes Lou, "don't you worry. We'll get our home some way." She tries to be brave.

"Got a bug in my eye," claims Jib winkin'.

The three of 'em stood there not speakin' for a few minutes.

Jib breaks the silence with, "Seems like we're goin' to have a blow. Glad I ain't on the desert."

"Pretty strong wind as we came up the canyon," affirms Bill.

"We're glad, Daddy, we're camping with you, because—"

THEN busts out the most tree-mendous, soul-stirrin' screeches like a steam calliope with its pipes full of shingle-nails. It sounds again and from above. They look up hundreds and hundreds of feet to the top of the cliff. They see nothin'. Another screech and over the brink of the cliff something flutters and wavers in the wind, a something white and no bigger than a handkerchief. Another awful yowl and the something flutters farther from the cliff, bubbles out, the wind catches it full, blows it free and it begins to float down. Below it dangles a reddish,

tawny blob no larger than a mouse. And all the while the screeches keep on comin' louder and awfuler.

"W-what's that?" demanded Bill.

"Oh, oh," says Lou, clingin' to Jib. "What is—is it?"

"That," explains Jib, sighin', "is Henry bringin' me my tent."

The thing swings lower, gets larger and the blob is the size of a kitten.

"Queer looking, that," says Bill, "kind of scollops around the edge and its creased and when the wind sways it, it looks lumpy like a—like a mushroom. Say, did you ever hear such howls?"

"Bill, Bill, that thing hanging to it is alive. I can see it wiggle!"

"Sure it is and that's what is yowling. Wonder what it is?"

"It's a cat, Bill, a cat!"

"No, too big. Might be a dog."

"Oh, Bill and makes noises like that?"

"Gosh! I dunno. Maybe I better get my gun," and he starts off.

"Bill, never mind," hollers Jib. "It'll be down 'fore you can git there." And Bill stays.

"I know, I know," yells Lou, "it's a parachute, it's a parachute!"

"Of course," agrees Bill as if used to seein' parchutes hop off cliffs. "It's going to land in that tall pine."

"No, in the sycamore beyond. No, it's swinging this way again."

"Gosh, just missed the pine! Gee, what lungs that beast has!"

"It's a great, big cat, Bill. Look at its tail!"

"Sufferin' cat and parachute jumpin' to boot!"

"Bill, it's swinging over again. It's going to light in that clear place this side the car," and she starts to run.

"Don't get too close," warns Bill, tryin' to head her off.

"It's a lion! It's a lion! It's a lion!" screams Lou.

The parachute did light in the clear spot and the canvas settles down fold on fold over the animal. Bill and Lou hover about the edge not knowin' what to do.

JIB come up. "Nice kitty," he says. "Henry, Henry," and a whimper answers.

He rolls back the canvas and there was Henry huggin' the ground and tremblin'; one scared cat he was. Jib unties him and he finds he's among friends again. He's introduced all hands 'round. He makes up to Lou at once. Bill straightens out the canvas and looks at it kind a funny.

"Dad," he says, "how come Henry make himself a parachute and jump off?"

Then Jib confessed what a time he'd had with Lou's tent, how he couldn't figger it out no way, finally had to give it up and knotted all the ropes together so they wouldn't get tangled, thus he had made a paarchute unbeknown to himself. He told how he tied Henry to the one long rope so he would stay there and be a surprise for 'em when they hit camp; but the wind blew the whole shootin' match over the cliff.

"He was a surprise, all right," states Bill and then he calls, "Lou, come here."

She and Henry trots over.

"Look what you gave dad for a tent," says Bill, pointin' to the canvas.

She studies it. "I'm so sorry, Daddy," she says, goin' to Jib and takin' his hand. "That's not a tent, that's the cover for our car. I got them mixed; they were rolled up side by side. I hope you didn't bother with it."

"Oh, no," lies Jib, thinkin' of his feeble-minded efforts to make a tent out of the thing. "I didn't bother with it."

IT'S 'bout noon time and Lou wants to get lunch all by herself. She figgers to make some biscuits just like Daddy Collum's. Bill tinkers with the car and Jib sits down to read the paper. Henry helps Lou with the grub. Jib left his specs in camp so can't make out the fine print so well, but he gets the headlines all right. On the first page, he notes about the zoo fire. It was pretty bad. He picks out how the bears got smoked out, the coyotes were half smothered and the velocipede—shucks! I mean the giraffe got singed. Down in one corner on an inside page, there was some printing with a black border 'round it. What attracts Jib is the large print. He reads it; he reads it again.

"Hoo, hoo, everybody!" calls Lou. "I'm going to take up the biscuits."

She does and at once celebrates with a screech that for dismalness compares favorable with Henry's best in his darkest mood. Jib and Bill rush over there. Well, those biscuits would have called for wailin' and gnashin' of teeth from anybody who tried

to bite 'em. They were hard and flat and well nigh unbustable.

"Oh, oh," cries Lou, stampin' her foot. "Scat, you nasty cat!" she says to Henry and shies a biscuit which if the lion had been five yards farther back and three to the left would have him right smack in the eye. "I—I know," she goes on, "Henry bothered me and I forgot the baking-powderooboo-hoo. H-h-horrid cat!"

"Here, here," soothes Jib, "don't abuse Henry none; he's a regular bungalooboohoo lion."

"He's a which?" demands Bill.

Jib passes over the newspaper and points with a finger. Bill reads, lets out a whoop and hugs Lou with his free arm.

"Listen, sweetheart. Listen!" and he reads:

Lost from location about five miles south of San Berinyo. One tame mountain lion. Stands about two feet high; length about four feet; long tail; color, tawny red, lighter on belly. Has strap collar with name, Henry, on metal tag. Animal is kind and affectionate. Five hundred dollars' reward if captured in good condition. See express agent at San Berinyo. Holly Motion Picture Corporation.

The two kids stand there lookin' at each other. Bill drops the paper and holds out his hand.

"Dad," he says, "I'm mighty glad you caught Henry and we're both happy you get the five hundred dollars."

"Goody, goody," sings Lou, hoppin' up and down.

"Five hundred for me!" utters Jib with deep feelin'. "Not much! I won't take a blame cent seein' the way that dratted cat moused me 'round, got my goat, bulled me all over, led me a dog's life and played me for a sucker. No, siree, it's a horse on him now; I'm all through. He's yours. I told you he was a regular bungalooboohoo lion. Call him a weddin' present. I won't have none of him. Get out, Henry!"

Lou drops to her knees and puts her arms around the lion's neck. "Isn't he cute!" she says and you just ought to have heard Henry purr.

Short Stories of Unusual Interest

in the March EVERYBODY'S

THE WATCH ON THE RHINE

By ARED WHITE

A fine, rolling and intensely human story of the American Army of Occupation

WAYS THAT ARE DARK

By L. G. BLOCHMAN

A highly keyed tale of a newspaper man kidnaped in China

THE MENACE AT BAR X

By BLATZ HENDERSON

An uproarious story of three school-marms, several cowboys and an Indian tribe

A Brief and Vicious Story of the
Australian Bush

Snake BITE

By Reginald Campbell

ON ALL sides of the man, crouched beneath the shadow of a rock, the Australian bush stretched away to the heat-dancing horizon. Overhead the sun shone pitilessly out of the brassy heavens. Near by a jackass laughed obscenely.

Yet, in spite of the stifling atmosphere, on the face of young Bretherton as he rested in the shade was a smile of satisfaction. And the smile was caused by the contemplation of a bag that lay at his side, the bag that now contained the fruits of six weary months of work at the back of beyond.

Five hundred pounds in gold dust: it was a lot of money. In two days' time, he reflected, he would have it safely in the nearest station, after which he would be married to Annie.

At the thought of the girl he glanced at a small tin case which was part of his outfit, and the smile broadened to a grin. He'd never used that medicine chest yet, and was never likely to, he told himself, but Annie had insisted on him taking the wretched thing into the wilds with him, and in order not to hurt her feelings he had reluctantly consented.

"Well," he breathed at last, "guess I'd better be getting along."

He placed one hand behind him to brace himself to his feet, and as he did so a pain, like a red-hot needle, stabbed through his wrist. He sprang to his feet and whirled, to see a snake, scarce a foot long, rippling away from him over the hard, sun-baked earth.

He leaped toward it and ground the writhing, tongue-darting atrocity to death under his heel. Then he looked dully, stupidly, at the tiny puncture on his wrist from which pinpricks of blood were oozing slowly, after which he glanced at the dead body of the snake.

A sob choked in his throat, and for a moment his senses swam, to clear again as his eyes took in the medicine chest lying beneath the rock.

Strychnine! His only chance, for the snake that had bitten him was a twenty-minute snake, so called because death came to those it bit in exactly that time. Twenty minutes to live, or twelve hundred seconds!

Swift as light he stooped, opened the chest, and withdrew a hypodermic syringe and a small phial containing a pale, colorless fluid.

The syringe filled, he bared one arm. He lowered the syringe till the needle was within the fraction of an inch of the white

flesh of the underarm, and then he hesitated, for words he had once heard from a doctor came back to his memory with startling vividness.

"Yes," the doctor had said, "there's only one cure for the bite of a twenty-minute snake. That's strychnine. The two poisons counteract one another. But if ever you're bitten, my lad, be sure that the snake is a twenty-minute snake. If it's a non-poisonous reptile the strychnine will kill you as sure as God made little apples."

Bretherton swung the syringe away from the arm and approached the snake once more. He examined it carefully. Yes, from the marking and coloring of the skin he was sure it was a twenty-minute snake. But *was* he sure?

If the thing were harmless then the strychnine would kill him in less than ten minutes; if it were poisonous and he did not use the drug the snake would kill him in twenty. It was a very pretty choice.

After a few minutes' hesitation he breathed a prayer to the Almighty, and, inserting the needle of the syringe into one blue vein, he pressed the piston home. And then he commenced walking rapidly up and down to keep himself awake.

* * * * * *

TWO days later, on a cool dawn, Bretherton stared dully around him. He saw the sun climbing over the distant horizon; he saw the dreary waste of scrub; he felt the morning breeze on his cheeks, and he knew he was alive.

Though he was very weak, and his tongue felt swollen in his mouth, yet he sensed that the danger was now over and that the strychnine had saved him. Nevertheless, for the last forty-eight hours he had been very near to death, in spite of the fact that he had forced himself to walk until he had dropped from sheer mental and physical exhaustion. A man can not have two highly dangerous poisons working in his blood and feel no evil after-effects.

After a while he struggled to a sitting posture, and reached for his water bottle, out of which he drank thirstily, so that it was well-nigh empty when he slung it over his shoulder. He then rose shakily to his feet, and began collecting his scanty belongings as he realized that, owing to the lowness of his food and water supply, he must push on at all cost to reach the station two days' march away.

He was in the act of picking up the medicine chest when the sound of voices behind the rock attracted his attention, and, peering over, he made out the forms of two strangers approaching from the direction of the south.

At the sight of the newcomers his heart bounded, for here was the very help he had prayed for to assist him on his way. He would buy food, water and possibly tobacco from them, rest one more day under the rock, and then complete the last stage of his journey at leisure.

Raising both hands to his mouth, he hailed them. At the sound of his voice and the sight of his head over the rock, they halted in their stride and glanced at one another, a trifle uneasily, so Bretherton thought. Then the taller of the two called across the space that intervened:

"What's up, stranger?"

"Been ill," shouted Bretherton. "Give us a hand."

"You alone?"

"Yes."

The pair advanced and a moment later were standing by the rock. And then did Bretherton's heart sink in his breast, for one glance at their features showed that evil was marked in every line of them. The one he judged to be the elder of the two was of gigantic proportions, with the mien of a veritable Caliban, while the other was in direct contrast to his huge companion, being short and wizened, and possessed of crafty, roving eyes that hinted at a Cockney upbringing in the far-off days of his youth.

The giant spoke again: "Guess you *do* look ill, stranger?" he mumbled. "What's come over you?"

Bretherton, as he saw the pair regarding him intently, was uncomfortably conscious of the weight of the gold-bag slung against his hip. Then his eyes fell on the medicine chest that still lay on the ground, and he made an effort to distract the newcomers' attention from his person:

"Snake-bite." He pointed to the chest and explained to them the agony and the horror of the past forty-eight hours.

When he had finished, they opened the chest and examined the contents curiously, after which they straightened themselves and looked him fully in the face. And then they sprang at him.

HALF an hour later Bretherton was lying, bound and gagged, beneath the rock. To his right the retreating figures of his aggressors moved slowly away to the north. With them went his dreams of the future, his gold dust, his medicine chest and the last of his food and water supply. Remained—the almost certain prospect of death by exposure and thirst.

Bretherton closed his eyes.

By that evening the ill-assorted pair had arrived at an ideal spot for a camp. Before them a large, clear pool of water relieved the dry monotony of the wasteland over which they had trudged wearily the livelong day, while near by a tall tree promised protection from the chilly night dew.

"We'll doss here," said the giant briefly.

His companion glanced round quickly. He saw the nature of the ground, he saw the pool and the tree, and an expression of fear flitted across his palid countenance.

"Bad place for snakes," he said uneasily.

"Snakes be damned," growled the other. "They won't hurt us if we don't hurt them. We sleep here, I tell you."

As usual it was the smaller of the two who fetched the water, prepared the food, and made the necessary preparations for the coming night.

Their scanty meal over, they stretched their weary bodies beneath the tree, and soon the breathing of two tired men sounded through the quiet darkness.

Gradually the moon rose and silvered the pool, and as its pure, ghostly light began to trickle through the leaves of the tree, the breathing of one of the men ceased.

Then slowly, very slowly, the Cockney raised his head and glanced stealthily at the man beside him. The giant was snoring in long, drawn-out grunts that denoted the deep sleep of utter exhaustion, and at the sound a glint of satisfaction came into the glass-colored eyes of the smaller man.

He slid from underneath his blanket and noiselessly opened the medicine chest. After an anxious scrutiny of its contents, he drew out two phials, which he held up to the light of the moon. He then filled with water the empty phial, which he knew was the one that had been used by the man they had robbed that morning, and, having marked it carefully so as to recognize it again, he replaced both the phials back in the chest.

He glanced fearfully around. Silence and the moonlight drenched the universe, and the giant still snored heavily. Satisfied that his movements had been unnoticed, he then drew a clasp-knife from his pocket, with which he cut off a small branch from the tree above his head. This he sliced at one end, and pulled the split portions apart with his fingers, so that the branch soon presented the appearance of a roughly made pronged stick.

Next, like a ghost he slid down to the pool, carrrying the stick in his hand.

THERE he watched, watched and watched and watched. Now and again a snake, having roused from its all-day slumber, rustled by, and he looked at it intently, only to let it go with a shrug of disappointment.

At last his quick eyes saw the one he wanted. It was a twenty-minute snake, and with a lightning movement he imprisoned its head in the pronged stick.

With the prong in his hand, and the snake wriggling at the end, he cautiously approached the tree. It was a dangerous job, but he reached his goal and bent over the sleeping man.

Taking another stick in his free hand, he then flipped the writhing death off the prong and on to the chest of the giant, which done he slipped like a grease shadow under his blanket on the other side of the tree.

The snake curled over the body of the sleeper, and touched one bare hand. At the cold contact the giant moved the hand, and the snake struck.

"God!" The bitten man sprang to his feet. He hurled off the snake, stared at it for a moment, then broke its back with his heel. He tore round to his companion.

"Wake up, wake up."

The Cockney raised a bleary eye from beneath a blanket. "Worramatter?" he murmured sleepily. "Worramatter?"

"The medicine chest, the medicine chest. Been bitten by a twenty-minute snake. S'w'elp me. Get a move on."

The smaller man rose upright, and he saw that the giant's face was ghastly under the wan light of the moon. He feverishly opened the chest and took out the phial he had marked, together with the hypodermic syringe.

Having filled the syringe with the contents of the phial, he injected the liquid into

the big man's arm. The latter then sank to earth and buried his face in his hands, his vast bulk rolling to and fro in an agony of fear.

Time passed, the while the other watched the stricken man narrowly, a grim smile on his thin lips.

At last the giant dropped his hands, and the Cockney noted with satisfaction that his companion's movements were becoming lethargic, and that his features were assuming a blackish tinge.

Words came from the figure below him: hoarse, whimpering, fear-strung words.

"It—it hasn't worked, it hasn't worked. I'm dying, I tell you. I'm dying."

And then did the Cockney's face become demoniacal. He shook a lean fist in the other's darkening face.

"Yes," he screamed, "you *are* dying. And you'll go to hell that's waiting for you." The speaker raised both hands above his head as he loosed the long pent-up flood of hate upon his victim. "It was *you* that led me to crime, *you* that made me do all the dirty work, *you* that collared all the gains, *you* that'd take the gold now if I'd let you." He paused as the torrent of wrath choked him in the throat.

"Christ!" With a last effort of the brain the giant endeavored to rise and kill his tormentor, but his limbs were nearly paralyzed and he sank to earth again, a futile bulk of helpless, gigantic strength.

An access of even worse frenzy came over the other. He sprang to the snake lying motionless on the ground, and seized it boldly. He flaunted it in the huge man's face:

"That was my snake," he yelled, "my snake. I caught it: I put it on you. And in your veins is water—water, not the dope." The Cockney broke off suddenly as a stab came into his wrist.

He looked at the thing in his hand, and saw that, though its back was broken, it was moving slightly. God, it was still alive. He had been bitten.

He flung it away from him, and gazed dully at the deep punctures that marred the fairness of the white skin.

Then a movement attracted his attention, and, taking his eyes away from his wrist, he saw that the giant was crawling toward the chest that lay close to the tree.

The man was there, by God: he was pawing it clumsily as if seeking something inside.

The remaining phial, the remaining phial! If that were broken he'd die. Like a maniac the Cockney sprang at the kneeling giant, but even as he did so the huge form rolled over dead on to the moon-splashed ground.

Feverishly, with nervous, plucking fingers, the Cockney fumbled in the chest. He found the phial. He took it out, and held it up to the light of the moon. Ha, it wasn't broken. He was saved, saved, by Heaven.

He looked at the label carefully. Yes, it was the strychnine right enough, for there was no mark on it. He hadn't mixed the two up and given the giant the strychnine. Yes, he was sure of that.

Remained—he filled the syringe and pressed the liquid into his arm.

BY THE following morning Bretherton was still alive, though his brain was beginning to evolve queer fancies. He was walking with Annie, he was. Dear little Annie. Jove, what a lucky chap he was to have a girl like her as his wife.

His dreams were shattered by the pounding of horses' hooves and the scattering of shale as the beasts came to a standstill behind the rock under which he was lying concealed from sight. A moment later the sound of voices brought him back to realities.

He made a desperate effort to shout, but not a murmur issued from the gag that bound his mouth. At last he wriggled frantically in his bonds, and dislodged a couple of stones near his feet. They rolled down the slope, and the voices stopped abruptly.

Next second Bretherton was looking down the barrels of two service revolvers. He blinked at them dully, then, as his eyes traveled beyond them, he made out the uniforms of two troopers, at the sight of which he fainted.

When he came to he was freed and three men were bending over him, all in the uniforms of the mounted police. One gave him a pannikin of water, which he drank thirstily.

"Now eat this." Some bread and meat were handed him, and he ate it ravenously, being in no mood for argument.

"And now," said the sergeant, when he had finished, "tell us all about it."

When Bretherton had come to an end of his tale, the sergeant whistled:

"The very men. Which way did they go?"

Bretherton pointed away toward the north.

The N. C. O. signaled to the horses, then turned to the young man: "Jump up behind me, son. We've business on hand."

THERE followed a two-hours' wild, exhilarating ride across the bush, when a pool and a shady tree came into their sun-dazzled eyes, and the party halted and dismounted.

Under the tree were two dead forms.

The sergeant made a careful examination of the ground. He saw the ghastly features of the dead men, he saw the snake, and, lastly, he saw the empty phial.

"Looks to me," he said slowly, "that the big 'un," he pointed to the giant, "died of snake-bite, and the little 'un of strychnine poisoning."

"But," quavered Bretherton, "that's a twenty-minute snake lying there, I swear it is. I've reason to know."

"Yep. But, that snake must have bitten the big fellow first, and then the small chap. Small chap must 'a' used the dope on himself first, so that none was left for his pal."

"Well?" queried Bretherton, mystified. "What of it?"

"What of it? Why, by the time the snake bit the little 'un there was no poison left in its fangs. See? He never thought of that, so he died from the effects of the dope."

"God," said Bretherton.

The sergeant handed him the bag of gold dust.

"Lot of money here," he remarked. "How much?"

"Five hundred pounds or so," answered Bretherton.

The sergeant laughed. "Got a girl?" he ventured.

"Sure thing."

"Guess she'll be pleased."

"She will," said Bretherton with conviction.

"And more than you think. Them two," the sergeant pointed to the recumbent forms, "were outlaws, thieves, and, what's more, murderers into the bargain. Got a price on their heads. Reckon you'll get a share."

"Lord," breathed the other. "Annie *will* be pleased."

And she was.

Part Two

Captain Brutal Saga *Flying Kestrel*

Preceding events briefly retold.

Val Orson, a hard-fisted, man-killing driver of men and ships brought the old clipper *Kestrel* into San Francisco completing a record run for sailing ships across the Pacific. The crew had been driven so hard by Orson that on reaching port they all jumped ship, with one exception—the first mate, Martin.

Orson bought the old *Kestrel* when she was to be junked and refitted her in something of her former glory. The clipper is his one love, his dominating passion. Men, to him, are only slaves with which to work his ship, while women afford him but temporary pleasure. The milk of human-kindness is not within him, his morality is that of an animal.

As is his custom, he had taken a woman with him on his last voyage, this time a little brown girl he captured in the Orient. On reaching port he turned her over to a missionary society telling them she came aboard as a stowaway.

The clipper's cargo is discharged, she is reloaded with lumber and made ready for sea. Because of his unwholesome reputation as a driver and mankiller Orson has great difficulty in engaging a crew. He tricks his former first mate, Martin, into reshipping with him, hires a second mate and finally shanghaies aboard a crew of jailbirds and waterfront scum. During the days occupied by these details, Orson has been much ashore and seen a girl, Nancy Prouse, he wishes to take aboard with him. Orson, knowing she will not come willingly, lays plans and finally kidnaps her. Just as he is getting Nancy into the tender, to go aboard and set sail, he is attacked by a Greek sailor, a member of his former crew. With him is the little brown girl Orson had left at the mission. Orson quickly overpowers the Greek, who tried to knife him, breaks his arm and throws him into the tender beside Nancy.

During the struggle the brown girl ran away and Orson pushes off for the *Kestrel*. Once on board he locks Nancy in his cabin, slips anchor and is away. They are followed by a police boat, but escape it in the fog. When they are well under way, Orson leaves the clipper in command of Martin and goes below to see Nancy. He finds her half out through a porthole and quickly drags her back inside.

CHAPTER VII

THE PROMISE

NO DOUBT Nancy Prouse was badly frightened. She crouched on the cabin floor and stared up at him. Her eyes were big and round. Altogether there was an attitude of rustic simplicity about her that intrigued Orson. She had been very desperately trying to jam her body through that porthole to almost certain death to escape him, and that alone stamped the girl as a new and astonishing type. Val Orson had known many women. He had known them from precocious adolescence clear through to over maturity; good women, frankly bad women, women of native innocence and women who were born without innocence. He had never before encountered a girl, so palpably healthy and alluring of body as Nancy Prouse, who actually preferred to try to

Dingle's of the SEA

drown herself in a foggy sea rather than accept the honor of his preference. True, the little Malay spitfire he had brought home the previous voyage was no bargain of submission at first; but it was no such foolishness as self immolation that she tried. She had tried to murder her ravisher; had almost succeeded, as Orson thoughtfully recalled, tenderly running his fingers down the tremendous scar on his brow; but by the end of the voyage he had tamed her very thoroughly indeed. He had rarely brought a conquest to so satisfying a conclusion. The very savagery of her had added piquancy to the intrigue. But here was a girl who puzzled him.

"What are you scared about, Nancy?" he grinned. He leaned over and laid a hand on her white shoulder. The clothes had been torn from her in squeezing through the brass-rimmed porthole. She shivered and drew back, holding her dress together with a tense hand.

Nancy Prouse was not over intelligent, perhaps; but she had been taught, from childhood, that a poor girl possesses one treasure, to be tenaciously held on to as long as she expects to be called an honest girl. That teaching was reflected in her darkly gleaming eyes and every line of her shivering body as she answered him in a low, vibrant tone.

"You mean to ruin me. But you won't. I'll kill myself if you touch me."

"Well, well, little sweetness! Honest to goodness virtuous, ain't you? Who'd ever ha' thought to find such a pearl? You and me'll have to have a little chat, Nancy. Get up, lass, and let's look you over again. Hell, I wouldn't hurt you. I want to show you a good time, see you laugh, hear you sing."

Orson gripped the girl by the arm and hauled her to her feet. As he swung her toward him, leaning to gather her to him in a fierce embrace, his eyes glittering and his lips puckered for a kiss, she tore loose, leaving all of one sleeve and half of her dress in his grasp, and climbed over the bed again, headed for the porthole. Orson chuckled. A new experience was something he had scarcely hoped for. There would be some kick to the subjugation of this one. He coolly seized her once more around the waist and pulled her back. Before he could begin what he meant to say to her, uproar broke out overhead; there were shouts; heavy steps sounded on the companionway stairs, and the second mate knocked on the stateroom door and shouted his message.

"The crew's threatening to turn the ship back and give you to the police, sir! It's that parson! The mate and me can't handle 'em, sir. Better come up."

Orson cursed softly. If he left that girl—and if he didn't—

"I'll be right up!" he roared through the door, and the second mate returned to the deck jumping. Orson turned to Nancy and did not attempt to touch her now. He looked straight into her eyes with a queerly soothing smile. It was one of his special tricks, but Nancy only learned that much later. For the moment she glared back at him. But as he spoke her fright died and gave place to unbelief; then to dawning wonder; a blush slowly spread over her dully pretty face.

"Nancy, you mustn't ever talk of killing yourself, my lass. You don't think I would harm a pretty girl like you, surely? You got me wrong." A tremendous jest had incubated in his fertile brain in the past few minutes, since Ringlin's report. "I wanted you the first time I saw you. You were shy. There wasn't time to court you, Nancy, so I just eloped with you. You rest up and get the smiles back to your pretty face. I got a parson aboard who'll marry us as soon as I quiet them blasted fo'c'stle rats o' mine. Anyway, don't cry any more. I hate a red nose on a girl."

Orson left her. He did not know whether he might expect to find her when he returned, or how. But as he turned in closing the stateroom door behind him he caught a flash of a girl peering in the mirror, dabbing at a nose which was by no means red, and looking anxiously for the truth.

HE CHUCKLED as he leaped up the stairs. On deck there was no time to chuckle. The entire crew forward, with the exceptions of Godwin and Norris, and the broken armed Greek at the helm, mobbed the mates at the braces, which had been let run, and the ship slopped idly on the sea, fanning the fog, her progress stopped. Just one glance was needed to show Orson how things stood, although the maindeck was almost invisible in the foggy murk. But there was the Greek, at his post. On the monkey bridge, where they had no business to be, Norris and Godwin leaned over the trail grinning down at the fracas. Orson caught sight of them first of all when his glance turned from the helm.

"You joined to see how tough Val Orson was!" he snarled. "One o' you relieve the Greek, the other fix up his arm. That'll take care of all the sober rats. If you want to see how tough I am, one o' you just disobey that order!"

Without a further glance at the three men, splendid in his contempt, Orson leaped down the ladder and plunged through the mob surrounding the two mates.

Her way stopped by the letting go of all braces, the ship rode gently on an easy swell; her yards swung, gathering momentum with every swing, clashing the gear, making windy thunder with the flogging sails. All around her the sea lay smothered in fog which drifted in masses all threaded with silver cobwebs, driven on the breath of a growing breeze. There was nothing visible to show how the *Kestrel* headed; but there was no sound near by to indicate undue nearness to danger either of land or launch. Orson could dimly make out the milling figures at the rail; and it seemed to him that all the trouble was being made by two or three men less drunk than the rest. All the others simply followed the natural inclination of a sobering shanghaied sailor in wanting to hammer officers who were probably contemplating hammering them.

"Ringlin, separate two rats from the pack and make 'em haul the braces!" snapped Orson, shouldering the nearest man heavily, who spilled two more men with his fall. "Martin, take those two men from the deck and make 'em haul. Leave the rest to me!"

While jerking out his orders, Val Orson methodically went to work on the indistinct faces nearest him. He had seen no steel or other weapons; he needed none himself then. Shrewdly he contrived to tackle first the less warlike wretches who only followed more doughty leaders. Chief of the leaders was the ex-parson who had already been marked out for future attention. The other more prominent leaders were jailbirds who should have known better than to try to turn the ship back harborward where the police were nosing the fog for her master.

With the cold ferocity of calculated hate Orson barefisted the men. Until the mutiny was quelled he was the killer in spirit. Clumsy fists struck him and slipped from him. A booted foot struck his knee, foiled in a graver attempt by Orson's restless agility. Three brutal faces, scarcely human in their half consciousness, jerked back from Orson's savage fists streaming

red. And since boots were being used, the skipper's boots completed what his fists had started on those three. Then he faced the actual leaders. They struck him hard, and with expert direction. Two there were who crowded him. He was grinning as they backed him to the bulwarks. All about was the whining of blocks as the braces were gathered in. The thunder of the empty canvas gradually ceased, and the great sails filled; the ship moved through the water again.

Orson was being crowded. But he had well earned his name. He ducked under one swing, gripping the nearest man with both hands by the throat. Then he brought up his head, and the face above his hands was a smear that would never be the same face any more. Now he laughed aloud, and the second man backed away. That was futile. Man after man had slunk away to join the men following the mates. The ex-parson was dodging around, seeking a chance to get in one lusty stroke at the fighting skipper. But Orson had other ideas. He swiftly darted forward and swung the second man between himself and the parson; and with the deadly certainty of a cobra's stroke repeated what he had dealt the last man. Then Orson's laugh was positively sunny as he slithered forward on agile feet and reached out for the ex-parson.

"Come here, Holy Joe!" he invited. "I wouldn't hurt a hair o' your head—yet. If you don't stop right where you are, I'll change my mind." Suddenly leaping, he fastened his hands on the frightened rascal and brought him to a halt at the midship house. "I've got a little job that's right in your line," he grinned. "Stop shivering, you yellow rat. There's grog in this."

That ex-parson was a cunning scoundrel. He had experienced most of the sharper edges of life; he had told his fellow men all about hell fire and damnation; he had betrayed his trust in that doubtfully useful direction; he had invited contributions for the building of a great edifice to the glory of God, and had spent the funds to the glorification of sundry women of no glory whatever and remarkably little virtue. Then jail, and release, and a natural gravitation to his true level, which he found among the crimps of the waterfront, to at last be discovered in his real character and in turn be made a chattel by those same crimps. In half a dozen voyages he had stirred up half a dozen rows. A beating rarely meant anything to him, because he was cunning enough to see to it that others got the worst of the beatings. In this *Kestrel* affair he had stirred up something in bravado which he had seen was too much for him as soon as it was started. But he had contrived to let others get hammered. It was only when Val Orson showed his real quality that the prime instigator of strife began to be sorry for himself. He had prepared himself for a painful experience, with a silent resolution that he would profit by it. And here was the notorious Val Orson, whose name was most obviously thoroughly merited, not only assuring him of immunity but suggesting grog into the bargain. And how the once Reverend Peter Groves craved grog at that moment!

"I want you to do a job for me in the saloon," Orson said. "Stand here a minute. Don't move, if you hate sore bones."

The skipper jammed the man against the ladder, and ran up to the poop to take a comprehensive survey of the ship. Whatever else might be said or suggested about Val Orson, nobody had ever dared or thought to say that he was anything less than a first rate seaman, a complete shipmaster. His first thought in that moment, when his ship was beginning to nose her way briskly through the dispersing fog, was far less of himself and the authorities he had flouted without any better reason than his unconquerable passion for female society, than of the ship herself. Her safety meant more to him than his own safety which her peril might jeopardize. While he scrutinized every aspect of the situation, he forgot utterly that there was anything in woman's shape aboard, and saw only that his fine old *Kestrel* was again in free flight.

ON THE saloon skylight sat the Greek. So swiftly had the uprising been quelled, that the setting of that broken arm and the bandaging of it was only just being completed. Whatever had been the skill of Norris, the arm was slung in a fashion, and the Greek had a pallid greenish tint in the misty glow that filtered through the skylight glass. Norris stood aside to let Orson examine the amateur surgery. Godwin steered, and there was a contemplative rather than a

calculating expression in his eyes as he glanced up from the binnacle to meet the eye of Norris.

Down on the maindeck the two mates drove the wretched crew to brace after brace, and sheet after sheet. First they had so trimmed the yards that the ship would sail and steer. Then they drove the gang all around again, more closely adjusting brace and sheet. After the trim was perfect, the mates bully-damned the poor scum that had presumed to stage a sailing day fracas, and drove them to every halyard, sweating up and swinging down until the wornout crew had no more fight in them.

All around the ship heaved the gray sea. The breeze blew fresh and fair off the land. Every minute it freshened. There was a faint, distant, occasional sound of a lighthouse fog signal. Somewhere beyond either fog or sound of horn boomed infrequently the warning of a steamer groping her way through the murk to harbor. Orson stepped to the wheel, Godwin glanced at his head as he leaned in front of him, and there was something of contemplation too in the glance. It really seemed, just then, as if the two bold men who had shipped ostensibly to challenge the supremacy of Val Orson had both come to the conclusion that the challenge was, at least, untimely.

"Bring her a full point to the south'ard, and steady her," was the order. Then Orson left the binnacle to bawl to the mates. One was to take charge of the ship, the other was to brace in the yards again all around. Mr. Martin came up the ladder, while Mr. Ringlin moved with relish among the fagged seamen, driving them to more weary lugging on the braces.

Without waiting to see how his orders were carried out, taking all for granted as was his habit, Val Orson called to the uncertain Groves shivering beneath the break of the poop, and on his appearance told him briefly:

"Get a Bible and come below. You're qualified to marry people, ain't you?"

The sorry ex-parson started, and stared. In all his devious career he perhaps had never experienced a shock just like that.

"Marry? Me?" he stammered, trying to grin. "Bible? Hell, captain, I haven't seen a Bible since last church service in San Quentin jail!"

"Get for'ard and find one then," retorted Orson. "Find the drunkest of the fo'c'stle rats. He'll have a Mission Bible. Get a move on. —— damn you, get going!"

VAL ORSON experienced a refreshing thrill as he went down to his cabin. Now that his ship seemed safe for the moment, his interest was all centered on his newest woman. A cynical grin wreathed his lips at thought of the sacrilegious trick he contemplated; but then, as his hand closed on the door handle, the grin faded and gave place to a frown of conjecture. How would he find Nancy Prouse? Would he find her at all? He believed the porthole too small for her body to squirm through; but then he had never known a girl like Nancy. Such desperate virtue as would impel to self drowning rather than submission to ravishment at his hands might well overcome the comparatively trifling obstacle of space. He turned the key, pushing the door open, more curious than he would admit to ever having been before where a girl was concerned.

The light was low; shadows filled the stateroom. Orson's first glance was toward the open porthole, through which the silk curtains fluttered, drawn by the eddies of air along the lee side. There was an ominous silence in the place. Orson's breath whistled softly through his clenched teeth as he stepped across to turn up the lamp. And a gently, catching sigh broke the silence as his hand found the wick-stem. It sent a thrill to his taut nerve fibers. The untuneful whistle became simply a sharp intake of the breath. And he peered down through the stanchions of the bunk foot at the sleeping figure of Nancy.

A smile came back to his tense face. He leaned over her, his hands half outstretched as if to clasp her. And the light in his eyes glowed with a deep fire. The girl's eyes were smudged from her tears. There were faint dark shadows beneath them. Her lips trembled, as if she were dreaming of desperate moments. One almost childishly plump arm lay across her breast, moving as she breathed, and the fingers clutched together at her throat the torn rags of her dress. Even to the sophisticated eye of Val Orson she looked a veritable child. Suddenly, she awoke in terror to meet the devil in his eyes, and her lips opened to cry out. And then the spurious minister appeared

in the doorway, book in hand, and announced in artfully unctuous tones:

"I am ready to join you young people in holy matrimony. Has the bride any one to give her away?"

Brazenly the Reverend Mr. Groves stepped over to where Nancy sat up affrighted in the bunk, and shook a wicked head at her. He took the girl's hand and assisted her to the floor, trying to catch her eye. But Nancy was simple enough to be deceived by the borrowed black overcoat and the borrowed collar, buttoned at the back, and the impressive Bible of the minister. She looked up shyly at the masterful man who had taken her because he wanted her, then kept her blushing face turned downward. She saw nothing of the wise glances that the two men exchanged as they arranged themselves for the ceremony, after calling in the steward to give away the bride.

CHAPTER VIII

HOLY WEDLOCK

WHILE Groves was conveying to Orson by sign, and with many a facial contortion, the discovery he had just made that the Bible he had secured was in Swedish and he did not understand the language, the girl tried with native nicety to arrange her torn garments. Nancy had been reared in rustic simplicity, of old-fashioned parents. She had been terrified at her abduction. But she really did not want to die. Nancy Prouse was young, and healthy, with bounding pulses and awakening realization of sex. Fully realizing the tremendous helplessness of a girl in the situation that had enveloped her, the promise of marriage somewhat soothed her. Until she saw evidences of the truth of the promise she had not been entirely at ease; she had dreamed disquietingly as she had slept. But now she was satisfied that, even if she had been given no choice in getting a husband, she was getting well out of a bad predicament and securing at least a husband of some importance both in manhood and material standing. She had seen girls from the boarding house come home elated because a second mate had taken them to a movie. They had jeered at her for a little country mouse, assuring her that she was too slow, that she might get a truckman or a soda clerk for a lover, but never a he-man or a man of substance. Now she felt rather thrilled. And she had never thought Orson particularly undesirable in the brief encounters she had run into with him up to the time he had bundled her up in her skirts and run off with her. Anyhow, paramount in Nancy's thoughts after all was the recognition that she was helpless in his hands. Her decision was not hard to come at. Since there was no doubt whatever that he meant to enjoy his game, she would at least make sure of his name. She waited with downcast head while Orson rummaged in his bureau for a ring. The steward was there, grinning, trying to catch her eye. He had heard all about Val Orson's little ways with women. But this was a new game he was playing. Groves stood with one finger between the pages of his Swedish Bible, also trying to convey a bold and suggestive smirk to the girl. Orson had contrived to make him understand that it made no difference what language he got married in. Groves knew that such a marriage as he was fitted to perform made no difference anyway. But as long as the girl didn't know that, nothing mattered.

"Here, steward, run along and get a galvanized grummet from the sailmaker. You know about the size o' the lady's finger."

Gravely the steward took Nancy's unresisting hand and estimated the size. He was gone and back again with the galvanized iron ring in five minutes, and the ceremony proceeded. The once Reverend Peter Groves held his nose aloft, put on an air of extreme solemnity, and peered down his long nose at the unintelligible script dancing up from the page at his scarcely sober eyes.

The preamble to that marriage service was rattled off at a rate and in a gabble which precluded the understanding of one single word. But when, with hand upraised, Groves sonorously asked:

"Do you, Nancy Prouse, take this man for your lawful husband?"

Nancy answered with a little shiver of nervousness:

"I do."

"And do you, Valentine Orson, take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife, to have and to hold 'til death do you part, so help you God?"

"I do," grinned Orson, slipping on the

ring without further ado and pushing the steward and Groves out of the stateroom at once. Groves attempted to resist. He had meant to kiss that shy little bride at least. If there was any fuss, he would soon tell her what her marriage was worth.

"Get outside," snapped Orson. "Steward, give this man a good hooker o' grog and let him get away for'ard."

Orson closed his door, and gathered Nancy into a close hug, kissing her hungrily. The girl was shivering. She accepted his hot kisses with closed eyes. It was nothing more than the natural perturbation of an innocent girl for the first time in the arms of a masterful lover. The skipper laughed softly, and released her.

"Don't be scared, Nancy," he soothed, patting her shoulder. "I'm going on deck for half an hour. Cheer up, lass, and have a smile for your husband when he comes back."

Leaving her, Orson stepped to the stairway. At one side was the pantry, and there were voices there. The steward was saying rough things to somebody. Orson sprang over there at the sound of Groves' insolent retort, and gripped the clothes of the first man he reached.

"He won't get out, cap'n," the steward complained, trying to protect a jug of rum with an enveloping arm.

"You said I was to have some grog, didn't you cap?" Groves countered impudently.

"I gave him a double shot already," the steward cried.

"Maybe you'll have more modest ideas when you shed this," snarled Orson, ripping off the collar that was buttoned at the back, and unbuttoning the borrowed black overcoat with one fierce sweep. "Get on deck!"

"Oh, I say, Cappy—" the rascal began, putting on a knowing smile and attempting a wink. He had never heard half of the truth about Orson, or he would never have dared that. The skipper's face darkened. Without a word he seized Groves by the breast of his shirt with one hand, and slapped him on the smirking face with the open palm a dozen times so tremendously that the blood spurted from nose and mouth and the man hung limp in the terrific grip at his breast.

The steward stared in awe. Orson dragged the man up the companionway, and the steward followed step by step, still gazing after the suddenly awakened terror until the deck was reached and Orson flung Groves down the poop ladder to the main-deck and bellowed for somebody to come aft and take him away. It was a thoughtful steward who went back to his pantry bed with many recently formed notions knocked to the winds.

THE fog was still hanging over the sea when Orson got on deck. The breeze had freshened considerably, and the *Kestrel* leaned easily to it as she slipped fast through the small seas. The fog moved in walls and banks, drifting athwart the decks like ghosts in the darkness. No lights were to be seen about the ship other than the very faint binnacle glow and a glow which was a lighter shadow rather than a light coming up through the frosted glass of the skylight in the captain's stateroom. Orson smiled a little when he passed that skylight; but his attention thereafter while he was on deck was all for his beloved old ship. Listening intently, he tried to detect any sound which might indicate neighbors. The foghorn he had heard on the lighthouse had long been left astern; for the ship sailed like a witch in the smooth water and already the patent log rotator was spinning with gratifying whirr.

A glance at the log and compass showed sufficient offing gained to dispose of any chance of a shore boat overtaking the ship. That course was not the course for the Horn; and Val Orson had designs on another record. He curtly ordered a change of course more to the southward, and bade the mate have the side lights put in the screens.

"Brace the yards up, Mister, and get the skysails and flying jib on her," he ordered. "Watch the steering, and watch the weather. I don't want sail taken off until I say so. You can pile on sail all you want. And keep the men jumping. Make the swine sweat until there's no fight left in 'em."

WITH a last glance around, the skipper stepped into the companionway chartroom. As he laid his ruler across the chart, and reached up to the book rack for Maury's passage book, his eyes darkened with a fervor greater than mere sex passion. He had left a brand new bride, fresh and shy, innocent and trembling,

with every intention of making his absence and her loneliness as brief as possible. Now, poring over the track chart, casting a mental line over the route recommended by the great navigator, he had but one aim in the world, which was to drive the old *Kestrel* to another record which would fade the last one into utter insignificance.

For an hour he sat there, calculating winds and currents, estimating whether extra distance sailed to find a good wind would be justified when the wind was found. Under the gimbaled lamp he saw the bulkhead working with the stress of the mizzenmast. The old ship vibrated, trembled with the power of her tremendous sail pressure. Every part of her old frame groaned and protested. Had there been a heavier sea running, the elemental sounds would have muted most of her complainings. Orson knew what the old ship was saying. But the old ship, like every other thing or creature, must yield to the terrific driving force which was the will of Val Orson. His teeth gleamed in the lamplight. With sure pencil he traced the course he had decided on. If winds, weather, and human endeavor could not keep her to that line, then she must be kept there by his own sleepless vigilance and consummate seamanship.

He had been away more than an hour when at last he opened the stateroom door and brought his thoughts back to his bride.

CHAPTER IX

TESTING A HARD CASE

BY NOON of the next day the *Kestrel* was flying south with rainbows of spray jewels about her bows. Orson had been up on deck half a dozen times during the night to mark her progress, and each time he appeared his alert perception found some small alteration of trim which, followed out at his order, mended the ship's speed. At dawn he was out again, and the bosun gave him his sea-water bath from the headpump hose. Among the gang with the deck-scrubbing brooms were many bruised faces. Not many dared scowl while Orson stood there in his naked masculine splendor with the hissing brine cascading about him. But many a battered face lifted and grinned viciously as his glistening back rose up the poop ladder. Among the gang were the two bold youngsters who meant to see how tough a bucko Val Orson was. They had thoughtful faces. The crew of the *Kestrel* was more numerous than ever before, which was food for thought. None of the forecastle crowd would ever understand the pride that urged Orson to run his wages account perilously near to the line of average loss in order that his grand old clipper might be driven to the last knot of speed obtainable through man power. And Norris and Godwin, believing as they did of Orson, could not at present conceive of such a man nursing a love for an ancient sailing ship that would rise superior to any other consideration on earth. They had seen something since sailing, and began to understand a little how Orson worked. But, full of the bubbling conceit of unbroken youth, they refused to see, yet, the efficacy of such methods in any case such as their own. And the greater the crew the greater the chance that, some time soon, there would be a showdown in the wake of such tactics as Orson had followed so far.

At six o'clock Nancy Prouse appeared on deck, and a good many pairs of eyes turned her way. She seemed a little timorous as she stepped out upon the heavy deck and felt the strong breeze on her cheeks. Orson had dressed, and was scanning every bit of the ship's tall rigging through his binoculars. The second mate stood by, already red in the face from the scathing little criticisms that Orson let fall.

"Put the men to work aloft and let the decks go," Orson snapped at last. "Don't ever let me find a broken seizing or a roband missing again. This ship can sail. If she don't it's up to you and the mate. A useless mate don't belong aft. Understand?"

Ringlin had been of the same opinion as Norris and Godwin, until the episode behind the mill. Now he received the scarcely veiled threat of disrating without showing more than a respectful acquiescence. And when Orson left him to go into the chartroom again, giving Nancy no more attention than if she had been a dockyard bollard instead of a rosy cheeked girl with blowy hair looking as if she might react very pleasantly to a smile, Ringlin roared to the bosun to knock off washing down decks and to send men aloft on each of the three masts to overhaul all robands and service. Water disappeared from the weathered old planks quickly. Age made the wood receptive.

As much water soaked in as dried off. Already the carpenter was thumping away with calking iron and mallet to tighten the seams around the coamings of the fore hatch. He had noticed that leak when battening down the hatches before sailing. Men trudged forward with the brooms and squeegees, to get supplied with marline and ropeyarns for the new job; and Norris and Godwin ran back aft well ahead of the rest of the gang, curious to take a nearer view of the girl in daylight whom they had seen carried aboard in a bundle at night.

Nancy smiled as they grinned at her. After her terrors, the brilliant morning was a reviver, and the novelty of being on a ship in the midst of a shoreless sea pleased her simple mind. Her sturdy body and leaping blood were sufficient guarantees against seasickness; Nancy's imagination was scarcely powerful enough to make her ill against the bubbling healthiness of her body. And a great deal of illness, at sea as ashore, is due to imagination. The two sailors stepped over to the mizzen rigging with their marline and ropeyarns. They had almost to touch her as they climbed to the sheerpole.

"Miss, it won't do for us to be seen talking to you, but if you're in trouble sing out. We'll be with you," Norris told her in a low tone. Godwin nodded agreement. The girl's big eyes followed them aloft. She had no idea what they were talking about. Orson came from the chartroom, not to join her, but to watch how his ship was bearing herself, and Nancy went to him and put a hand on his arm, looking up at him in innocent puzzlement.

"There isn't going to be any trouble, is there?" she asked.

"Trouble?" he echoed, with lifting brows. "What's put trouble in your head, girl?"

"Those two men up there—" pointing aloft to the mizzen topgallant yard—"said if I was in trouble to sing out and they would come to me."

Orson wore a grim expression as he identified the two men. Not many minutes ago he had caught sight of Groves, his face all bruised and swollen, and the swelling and the bruises had not been enough to wholly disguise the sinister threat in that face. It was not a very stiff problem to figure out that there might be a connection between that expression on Groves' face and the bold proffer of help from the two sailors. Undoubtedly the rascally ex-parson had told the whole forecastle of the marriage. That might mean little to the men in general. They would probably think it a huge joke. But men of the caliber of Norris and Godwin would be likely to place more value upon the news.

"Listen to your husband, Nancy," Orson replied, patting her hand as it lay on his sleeve, "there won't be any trouble that'll trouble you. If you ever feel like singing out for help, shout to me. I'll handle all the trouble in this ship. Run below now and set the table for breakfast."

WHEN the men came down from aloft for breakfast at eight bells, Orson stood at the mizzen pinrail until Godwin and Norris reached the deck. They passed boldly by him. They might easily have gone down by another way; there were mizzen stays that ran down to the main, and swarming either of them was no difficult job for a sailor. But these youths were full of the unchastened cockiness that takes no heed of mere warnings. They glanced at the skipper as they passed him. He said no word to them; his face was cold and disinterested; but they must have caught something in his eyes in that passing glance they gave him, for they hurried down the poop ladder and along the maindeck with their eyes set straight ahead of them and no speech on their lips.

Long before noon that first day at sea the unhappy crew of the *Kestrel* received a fair intimation of how the voyage must go. The breeze that had banished the fog in the night and sent the old ship groaning through leaping, sparkling seas, grew to a whistling half gale in the forenoon watch. Mr. Martin uneasily watched his flying kites as the sprays slashed across the heeling decks. Val Orson only watched the log, and the trim of his yards. There were moments when the lee waterways were afoam with green seas, and the scuppers spouted thick jets of brine half-way across the deck. The ancient spars creaked and whipped. They were kept standing more by the rigidly attended gear than by any of their remaining sturdiness of fiber. The skysails and royals, flying jib and upper staysails between masts were full of windy sunlight, ready to explode into flicking ribbons. All through the foaming clipper was a steady, rhythmic thrumming of stress that was almost at the breaking point.

"Mister Martin, she'll do better than this," Orson said after long scrutiny. "Check in the upper yards a trifle, and take in the flying jib." Martin's eyes glistened. Here was the notorious sail carrier, Val Orson, talking of taking in a sail while the sun still shone. But Orson was not yet done: "Too much headsail buries the lee bow and holds her back. Remember that in future."

There was a half hour when Orson never left the log dial after the changes had been made. The ship was surely making a half knot more speed. She was also showing it by the shrill squealing of stanchions and bulkheads. Getting on to eight bells, when Orson got his sextant for the meridian observation, Chips emerged from his berth with the sounding rod and line, to sound the well. The second mate stood in the chart room ready to relieve the deck. There were no assistant navigators on that flying *Kestrel*. Orson permitted neither Martin nor Ringlin to meddle with the reckoning. What would happen if he were taken sick, or had the sort of accident such a man is very likely to have with such a crew, never bothered the skipper. He possessed the spirit that makes commanders of men. Many a time had a crew watched Val Orson grow thin and haggard with gripping illness born of bad weather and weariness; the chance they had watched for had never come yet; Orson might burn himself up, but as long as one spark remained alight in his vitals he would so continue to blaze to the eternal defeat of his enemies. That spirit urged him to be the sole keeper of the ship's reckoning.

While he stood, hack watch in hand, waiting for the sun to come to meridian, sighting through his sextant tube every minute as time drew near, Chips knelt at the sounding pipe amidships, staring aft full of some great matter of ship's business yet not daring to out with it before the skipper ordered eight bells to be made. But the moment Orson had signalled to the mate to strike the bell, and the four mellow double strokes had clanged out on the rushing air, Chips got to his feet, gathered up his chalked and jointed rod, and staggered aft as fast as his nervous knees would carry him. Orson entered the chart room without giving Chips a glance. It was the mate to whom the report was made:

"She musta started a butt, or opened a seam, or somepin! There's two foot o' water, took on midship swing, too."

"When did you sound last?"

"Eight bells this mornin'. I believe she's wide open!"

Mr. Martin met the eye of the second mate, and grinned sourly. Ringlin was looking aloft at the cracking canvas when he was not shooting furtive glances through the chartroom door at the skipper over the chart table.

"It's Mr. Ringlin's watch. Report to him, Chips," said the mate, and took himself off below out of the way. Chips was for taking the report to the skipper in person; but Ringlin knew enough to prevent that. He turned Chips toward the ladder.

"Get for'ard and I'll send a pumping-gang to you," he said. "You and bosun spell each other while you get yer dinner."

Chips trotted forward growling about leaky ships. The second mate waited for Orson to finish his calculations and prick off the ship's position. But the skipper as soon as he had finished with the chart, took down an old record book and began to study the daily runs of the ship that had made the record he was out to beat. Two feet of water on a level floor was serious, and Mr. Ringlin meant to spread the responsibility.

"Chips reports two feet o' water in the well, and making fast, sir," he spoke through the door.

"Start the pumps."

"Take in sail, sir?"

"Yes, if you're tired o' living aft! You've got men enough to pump her around the Horn. Make 'em sweat."

Orson returned to his book. Something occurred to him.

"Where's that Greek?" he asked.

"For'ard, sir. Too sick to turn-to."

"Bring him aft and make him steer. One arm's enough in this ladies' weather. I'll tell a man when he's to lay up."

ALL the afternoon watch the pumps clanked out their harsh refrain, and the water gushed across the deck steadily. Into the first dogwatch the cursing men pumped, and then the pump sucked at last. There had been no song to lighten the labor. There had been much throaty growling. When the men came on deck for the first dogwatch and found they had still to pump, there was something more than growling. Groves led a threatening chorus.

"You fellows let him ride you this early, and you'll smell hell all the passage! Make him take in sail."

"All right, you go tell him," came the retort from one man whose features had been improved on during the night by the skipper's handiwork.

"Leave it to me, if you're not men enough," sneered Groves, with a sly glance at Norris. Godwin had gone aft to relieve the wheel. He was now coming for'ard again, leaving the Greek to steer another watch with his one arm.

"She's a heller all right," Godwin announced, taking his lace at the pump brakes and looking aft reflectively. "That dago has steered four hours now, and will stand another two if not more, without making a peep. Ought to see his eyes though."

WHEN, midway through the first dogwatch, the water was all out of the ship, the men were driven a weary round of halyards and sheets and braces, taking watch tackles and strops to sweat up gear already twanging taut. And the sea swirled about their legs in the waterways, the sprays struck them like shots while flattening the jibs on the forecastle head. They were wet through and sore-handed when at last they went to their miserable forecastle for supper. Breakfast and dinner had been eaten almost without noticing what they ate. Hunger was a sauce to some; a hangover opposed appetite in the rest. But now they were to discover just what the *Kestrel's* fare was to be. A young hand carried along the mess kids and coffee pot. And the men stood around and glared at the unhealthy slices of the same cold salt junk they had left at dinner time. That, with hardtack, and bitter, muddy coffee was their evening meal after a day of back-breaking work.

"Damned if I'd stand it," said Groves, and added after a pause, "if I was hungry."

"What'd you do?" Norris inquired with curiosity.

"I'd take it aft and face the Old Man with it, if I was like some of you good little lads who didn't get thumped yet. Somebody whispered to me once that you and your mate there shipped in this hellship to see what Val Orson was made of. I'll show you what he's made of as soon as my face comes back to normal. If that kidnapping swine hadn't knocked my teeth crooked, I'd want supper, and I'd show you how to get it. But you windbags—"

"Let's go and brace him," said Godwin, gathering up the mess kid. "Who's coming?"

"Here. You don't want nobody else," cried the inevitable sea lawyer, hastily searching through his bunk and producing a booklet. "Here's the lawful scale o' perwisions, all wrote down. Show him that, chummy. He daresn't do nothing to yer. If he do, we'll all come aft when you sing out, won't we mates?"

Norris and Godwin went aft with the meat, which thus early in the voyage offended the evening air in spite of the breeze. Orson had economized on stores in order to provide one or two more men. He had enough of a sort to adhere to the legal ration; but it was close cutting, and nobody knew better than he that the first days of the voyage were certain, the last days most uncertain. He had seen the two men come aft, and when they halted at the bottom of the ladder he met them at the top.

CHAPTER X

"THE DEVIL'S FATHER"

THERE was something almost mysterious in the manner of Orson's disarming that complaint. As he met the two men, Nancy and the steward emerged from the cabin companionway, each with a dish, and started toward the galley. Orson halted them.

"What's the trouble?" he inquired civilly of the men.

"This!" retorted Godwin, thrusting forward his mess kid with the aromatic slices of hard beef. Godwin was short of temper in face of the skipper's supreme poise. He had expected an outburst; and was met with polite words. "This ain't what we signed on for, and you know it."

Orson looked into the kid, smelled at the beef, and beckoned Nancy over. And he talked meanwhile, quietly, without heat.

"I forgot that you two men might remember signing on. My mistake. But as for the food, you have the same as I have aft. Here, Nancy, show 'em our beef. D'ye see, men, it's all out o' one cask. Only one sort o' stores in my ship. Fair sharings and no favors. But I told the doctor to

make hash for you. The stooard and my wife is going to make hash for the cabin now. If you want hash instead of cold beef, see the doctor, m'lads. Lay for'ard, now, and don't start trouble-before it's due. Run along, Nancy, lass, and hurry our supper."

Nancy led the steward down the ladder past the malcontents with an air which she might previously have worn had she been suddenly promoted to the managership of the boarding house she served in.

The two bold sailor lads stared around after her in a sort of mystified daze. The girl appeared so palpably sure of herself, so content with her position, and the steward trotted so docilely after her that it was doubtful whether that boozy ex-parson-jailbird-seaman had told truth, or simply started a stirabout of trouble for them. And if Orson spoke truth about ordering the cook to make hash for the forecastle, the backbone of their complaint was broken; the mere aroma of deepwater salt horse was no cause for war; made into hash even the least tasty of salt meat could be made palatable to hungry sailors.

THEY turned and took the beef to the galley. Inside they found the doctor fuming, his small kitchen occupied by a blushingly anxious bride and a fussily eager steward grinding up meat and onions and potatoes.

"Here, Doctor!" growled Norris, shoving in the beef kids and almost knocking the cook's nose with the rim. "Old Man says the fo'c's'tle gets hash out o' this. Get a move on with it."

"Tell th' Old Man to come and make his blessed hash!" snapped the doctor. "You can see how much chance I got."

"That's yer own funeral," Godwin cut in shortly. "The order was to give us hash for supper. You gave us cold hoss and hardtack. If hash ain't for'ard in an hour you'll have yer ears burning. And you'll bring it along yerself, too, savee? No able seaman's going to use up his dogwatch trotting back'ards and forrards over your damned laziness. "Shake 'em up now."

Giving Nancy a sharply inquisitive glance as they left, the two sailors tramped forward to tell their mates that hash was the net result of their embassy, or would be when it was delivered. More growling greeted the report than it would seem a few pieces of rank beef warranted. But then it was ever the deep-waterman's sacred privilege to growl; and since they might no longer growl at the nature of the supper, they perforce growled at the delay.

"Did you tell 'im all about the lawful 'lowance like I told yer?" the sea lawyer wanted to know.

"Hell! I'll wager they didn't go to him at all, but bribed the doctor into making hash," the biting voice of Groves broke in from the gloom of his forward bunk.

"Never you mind what way we wangled it," snapped Godwin, rummaging for his pipe and lighting the dottle. "Hash'll be good for your loose teeth anyway. Maybe you won't have so many loose teeth at that if you keep on yapping."

"That's interestin'," sneered Groves. "How come?"

"You'll have 'em knocked out."

"The law sez no knockin' a bloke about, and that goes fer for'ard as well as aft, me lads," the sea lawyer stated with the emphasis of one trying to make an impression upon men who might possibly at some time be tempted to do some knocking about upon himself. Sea lawyers have sailed the seas since the seas were sailed; and more than a fair proportion of them have suffered at the hands of rough shipmates whose respect for the law did not extend to amateur exponents of it.

Norris and Godwin smoked their pipes and ignored the little oracle. They did not ship in the old *Kestrel* to start a forecastle fracas; and the object of their real interest rather disarmed them by his unexpectedness than awed them by his terrors. Furthermore, they were not trouble makers. When they vowed that their reason for wishing to sign on in the *Kestrel* was to see for themselves just how tough a shipmaster had to be to earn such a name as Val Orson had got, they told the simple truth. They were the Castor and Pollux of the sea. For years they had shipped together or not at all. They fought on occasion with a joyous verve that carried the fight out of the class of a fight into the realms of Olympian sport. About the only times they sailed a traverse apart were those moments of dalliance with the ladies of the seaports, and when they came upon a boxing tournament in their wanderings. A girl was a one man affair, anyhow. A boxing contest might develop into a final between them; and Godwin and

Norris had never fought each other, nor wanted to, since the memorable sailortown fight that had brought them together.

As they smoked, they caught each other's eye, and a faint smirk might have been translated into a grin of understanding by intimates. Daylight still poured through the door, and the slight overhang of the forecastle-head break kept the flying sprays from entering with the light. The forecastle was thunderous with the thud and roar of seas. Outside the door was the great wet arch of the foresail foot, dripping, booming with wind. Crashing seas burst against the clipper's rushing bows, and great sheets of water flew up and athwart the decks. The sky was as brilliantly blue as new Easter silk, and held no threat of ill weather. Yet the *Kestrel* groaned through all her frames; the decks worked; what the condition would be when she fought the vicious seas of Cape Stiff was a problem. A trickle of water ran across the floor between Godwin and Norris, and they both sought the source with their eyes. There was no leakage at the deck beams, which was wonderful; but the leak was seen to start at the eyes of the ship, which was disquieting. Right forward where the ceiling did not carry across the timbers clear to the stem, that trickle of water started. It was well above water-line, except when the ship plunged into a sea. Watching closely, every dive the clipper took could be seen to bring in a spurt of water. Some of it went down between the timbers; some trickled across the forecastle floor.

Nothing in that to alarm the ordinary forecastle hand. Besides, supper was now long overdue. Men grumbled. They began to comment unguardedly about a certain pair o' young know-alls who took it upon themselves to carry the grub aft to complain, and now all hands had to wait for their supper until they were too hungry to smoke.

But they had little time to follow that line, for the doctor came dodging forward between sprays, carrying a mess kid covered with a dirty apron. His face was black with more than grime. The glance he shot at Norris and Godwin as he passed by them was eloquent enough to need no words. They grinned in cheerful response and joined the rest of the hungry gang with spoons and plates. The first man had put his spoon well around a fine big lump of hash, and was doing his best to work it so that he could get more than his whack without being detected. The cook never ceased growling until he left the door again, and then he growled harder all the way back to the galley. But before he reached that haven of security and warmth the hail pealed forth from the poop:

"Start the pumps again, Chips! Get all hands on it and rattle her free."

For a moment there was ominous silence in the forecastle. The man at the hash kid crammed his mouth full, and the next man dug into the mass with his spoon, stealing a mouthful without putting it on his own plate first. Godwin reached forward and knocked the man's spoon from his hand; and the sea lawyer howled angrily:

"They carn't do it! They ain't got the right to starve us! The law sez—"

"Shake a leg! All hands to the pumps! Come on, lads, if you start a song you'll have her free in half an hour. Rise and shine, m' lads!" Chips and the bosun appeared in the doorway, puffing the last few mouthfuls of smoke from their pipes before turning to work. Cursing, the men followed them to the pumps.

"Somebody start a song," Chips urged, kneeling down with his sounding rod. "Now me lads. Give us Sally Brown."

"Give yer a thick ear, y' bloody wood spoiler!" snarled the man who had stolen the hash, his lips bleeding from a spoon cut. He was not sure enough of himself yet to tackle the man who had hit that spoon from his hand.

"Come on, sons. Sooner it's done the sooner we eat cold hash," shouted Norris, and the pumps began their monotonous, weary grind as night came down cloudless, bright with stars, windy and full of the strong tang of the brine that flew.

IT WAS an hour before the ship was free again. Then it was time to commence the first watch. Men seethed with discontent. The Greek came forward at the change of the watch, having stood eight hours at the helm of the flying clipper with his one arm. His teeth were clenched tightly, and he smiled a fixed, mirthless grin that made men shiver as he passed them in the gleam of the lamp. He had nothing to say. He spooned cold hash into his plate and ate stolidly. His eyes were like black glass with red specks blown in at the back.

Aft, Val Orson stood at the weather rail bareheaded to the gale. He had eaten a hurried supper, sent Nancy to her stateroom, and returned to the deck immediately. While the men ground away at the pumps he listened to the clank-clank, scowling when it seemed to slacken in the moments when gangs were shifting. At every half hour he read the log himself. His glance at the compass was like the dart of a rapier. The Greek was luckier than he knew, in steering his one-handed trick so well. Then the skipper would enter the chartroom, and pore over a notebook which was full of transcribed figures from the book of records. Hour by hour as the night deepened, Orson's face grew brighter and keener. He spoke to nobody. But neither did he curse the helmsman when an unexpected sea broke at the ship's quarter and drenched all on the poop, Orson worst of all.

Until midnight he stood there. When the watches were changed again he briefly told the mate that the ship was doing well.

"Pump her every watch, mister, as long as she strains. She's an hour ahead of record right now. But she can't carry water. Keep her free, mister, and call me if it moderates."

That spanking gale lasted for three days, and men were too dog-weary with pumping to do more than fling themselves into wet bunks all dressed after their toil to snatch a few precious moments of rest before going to toil again. Nancy Prouse was a silent spectator of the ship's splendid performance, and she cared little what the scowling men who seemed always pumping water might be thinking; her whole soul was centered in that alert, tense figure who directed the ship's destiny, who seemed tireless, impervious to hunger even, who left his bed a dozen times nightly to face the chill wind so that his ship might lack nothing of seamanly guidance; centered in her man.

The girl's cheeks were browned above the roses, like ripe russet apples. Her eyes had the sparkle in them that had first of all attracted Orson. She was a living, breathing model of good health and buoyant spirit; and if she did not intrude upon the ship's outward affairs with idle feminine chatter, it was because she was too rapt in her own little universe, which began and ended in Val Orson. He was the universe, and the lord of it.

In the village where the girl had been reared folks still believed in God, and a wife was believed to be under the obligation to cleave to her husband until death did them part. She had been too brief a time in the big city to have fallen for jazz and the bright lights. A few movie shows with another girl about tallied her experience of dissipation. When a love-story was flashed on the sheet she would sit with clasped hands, and head held sideways, sighing for the handsome hero, weeping with the disillusioned heroine, awed by the wicked machinations of the villain.

Now, in a new world, she was living her own little romance. She had already changed her ideas about the manner of her mating. Frightened at first, she had been lulled by the marriage ceremony. She had ceased to be afraid of Orson, and only regarded him now with a sort of youthful admiration; for while his ship sped gloriously on her way, Val Orson was a pleasant man to live with. For a wife, that is. His sailors might and probably did hold far different views. But toward Nancy he showed his better side. True, he spoke little; but he would stop to pinch her ear, or her cheek, pull her hair or shake her with mock savagery that was fascinating to a girl who had once persuaded herself that a cave man would be the acme of lovers. Poor foolish Nancy had no real conception of out-and-out brutality. The little twinges of pain Orson caused her satisfied her. They were to her the real thing. And, in other ways too, Val Orson was quite the complete husband. Nancy was satisfied.

THE breeze died away, and persisted for days as a tantalizing air with puffs which flattened only to deceive. The change worked a transformation in all the widely differing elements of the crew. While the pumps required to be manned every watch, men were so utterly weary that they ate and slept with tremendous zest, never caring that their food was bad or that their beds were wet. They had no time for growling seriously.

The customary growl that must accompany all tasks, and which was a sign of well being in them, was heard at all times. But the more subdued, bitter snarling that goes with the concoction of mischief was never heard while that old clipper piled up the foam at her figurehead

and trod down the seas like a steamboat.

The mates stood their round of watches, and since taking in sail was forbidden, and pumping occupied the men's time to the exclusion of other seamanlike work, there was little for them to do except closely watching the steering, keep the gear well sweated up, see that the water did not gain on the pumps, and keep mental tally on the repairs which would have to be made on the rigging as soon as the breeze slackened enough to modify the leak.

ORSON watched his ship night and day, comparing her progress with those old records, snatching time to eat just so much as would keep him alive, sleeping scarcely that much, until he became a lean, bronzed, bright-eyed gaunt specter of eternal vigilance, haunting every helmsman who shambled aft to take the wheel. The Greek's broken arm slowed up in the mending, which was little to be wondered at. The man's swarthy skin turned color until it was a muddy yellow. He watched Orson with smoldering eyes; smoldering with the revived fires of hatred from that last tremendous voyage, and the added fuel of agonizing injury in the present. Orson noticed the change. He had reasons for wishing that Greek to recover quickly quite apart from considerations of work. He had a little matter of attempted knifing to adjust.

He took the suffering Greek below, and broke the arm again and reset it after drenching it with powerful antiseptic to combat the breaking out already evident, and sent the man forward with a stiff shot of rum in his belly. Then he had to laughingly reassure Nancy, who stood in the door of her cabin wide-eyed with horror at the cold-blooded operation. The giving of rum partly assured her that her wonderful man might not be all brute to his men. But it required five minutes of his own cunning diplomacy to drive the horror entirely from her eyes.

"He is the devil's father!" the Greek told the forecastle through gritted teeth.

And the breeze fell, the log no longer whirred. Orson paced the poop nervously, grinning unpleasantly. The ship took less water, until soon she needed pumping but once a day. Then the rigging work was started. Men found time to talk. Complaints rumbled through the ship.

CHAPTER XI

NANCY DOUBTS HER STATUS

AS THE days passed by, and the *Kestrel* made her tardy way south, Orson assumed a very different character to the one Nancy had grown reconciled to. Between hours of faultfinding and bouts of sarcastic comment that drove the mates to the verge of imbecility and made good helmsmen steer very badly, he sat at his chart table with the record book before him, going over his figures time after time in the futile attempt to assure himself that the *Kestrel* was not really falling behind the schedule she must maintain in order to achieve another record in her old age. No figuring would do that. Once since stealing out of 'Frisco Bay in the foggy night she had been many hours ahead of that schedule; now she lagged a half day behind. And the wind that she needed to drive her throbbing south'ard hung coy below the horizon.

In all her appointments the old clipper showed the results of economy and advancing age. There were gipsy-winches on the topgallant rail on each side, in the wake of the main rigging; these were used in need to help man power in taking home the main sheet when the winds were overlusty. Halyards whose lower blocks should have been fastened on deck, were eked out by lengths of wire or chain. The royal and skysail halyards' lower blocks were made fast high up at the topmast heads. Bulwark panels which once were polished, showing the beauty of the wood, now showed up poorly under flaky paint. Teak buckets in an ornate rack beneath the poop rail, which was also of finest teak, were heavy with many a coat of brown, and their brass bands were crudely covered with aluminum paint. The booby-hatch companion was mahogany. It hid its glories under paint.

One afternoon when the noon sights had placed the ship far behind any record, Orson aroused the mate from his afternoon nap.

"Mister Martin," he said acridly, "the ship's like a Noah's Ark. She will neither sail not drift. She looks like hell. The men grow fat and — damned lazy. And you sleep in the daytime. Get out o' your bed, Mister, and earn yer salt. The men will have no afternoon watch below until

the ship is in good order. Scrape off the paint from rails and stanchions. Polish 'em. The poop buckets, too; and the booby-hatch companion. The rigging looks as if I had a crew of Mexicans. Renew the service, Mister, and you'll find tar in the stores. And when you go on deck, send that Greek down to me. I think he's sojering."

"That man's sick, sir. He's not faking," the mate ventured, ill pleased at having his nap broken in such a manner.

"Any man's faking who carries a broken arm a month in my ship!" Orson snarled.

To other duties now was added the dreary dry scraping of paint from old wood. The men hauled braces to every air that blew; and went back to their scraping immediately. Orson sat on the poop, his books in his lap, and no man dared presume that those keen eyes were necessarily riveted upon print. The Greek held buckets between his knees and scraped with one hand, grinning as a human being was never meant to grin in this world. Godwin and Norris did their work as seamen should, and found much amusement in watching others. There was Groves, lazily scratching paint, staring boldly aft, talking all the while with Tredway, the sea lawyer. Between those two there was work done that would have shamed a green lad. But Norris had seen, and told his chum of it, that Orson was by no means so intent upon his books that he was not noticing the ex-reverend rascal and the forecastle attorney as they presumably worked.

But even in the splendidly fine weather, under blue skies that were like a benediction, in sunshine which soaked through to men's bones and warmed their blood, sailors' rest was an empty word. Breaking in upon the harsh scraping of dull steel on flinty paint.

"Check in the royal and skysail yards, and brace up all the lower yards a trifle!" Orson would roar, leaping to his feet on a sudden impulse. Scrapers would clang to the deck. Whatever officer was on watch would swear under his breath and drive the men grumbling from rope to rope. Gear would be coiled, and men would pick up their tools again, the oldest hands to steal a minute and maybe a puff at the pipe by visiting the grindstone. The watch officer would make a close inspection of the work done, and again take up his place on the poop, when—

"Take the handy-billy to the halyards all around, Mister. The sails hang like dirty shirts on a bush!" the skipper would rasp out. There would be more sullen tramping from rope to rope; more back breaking dragging on gear already bar taut; more scraping, and grumbling, and cursing.

AND lately, although the weather was so fine as to almost drive Orson frantic, and the sun was mellow and the air like wine, Nancy was not often on deck. When she did appear, she usually carried some bit of feminine sewing work, which however she did not work at while Orson sat there. Mostly she stayed in the cabin during the daytime, coming up for an hour before supper after having made up some sort of dainty for the table out of the poor stores at her disposal. When she did appear, her eyes followed Orson fixedly. They were soft, and glowing, those eyes; and there was unexpected depth in them. Lately there was also a light in the depths which intensified as she watched her man.

Her man gave her mighty little attention those days. He had no word for her, scarcely a look, while on deck. As the days mounted up, and he grew leaner and grimmer in proportion to the dropping behind schedule of his ship, he spoke to her, if at all, with no more gentleness or respect than he used toward mates or men. Yet always on going below to supper, he would caress her with some rough gesture. It hurt her more often than not; but she replied to the pain with a softly submissive smile. Nancy was secretly proud of his stern aspect. It made those infrequent little notices priceless.

One evening after a viciously laborsome day, Groves passed Nancy on his way to take the wheel, and Orson was not in sight. There had been many a clash in the forecastle between sour-tempered men since the monotonous round of pumping had given place to more wearisome scraping and pulley-hauling. Some of the fellows who had been beaten up that first night out, began to cast slurs at the more fortunate ones who had escaped the experience of Orson's methods. The Greek alone kept a somber and portentous silence when reprisals were talked about. He had sailed in the ship on that last record-breaking passage; the skipper was quite plainly down upon him;

and he said nothing. All of which was very sufficient reason for his shipmates respecting his moods and expecting to see him force action of grim sort when he was ready. But Groves, ever remembering the terrific slapping he had received after the marriage ceremony, and unwilling to invite a repetition of it, fumed to think that his pains were still unpaid for; and the train of thought turned his attention to those two young sailormen who had boasted that they joined the *Kestrel* just to test the toughness of her hardcase skipper.

"Tough?" Norris laughed in derision when Groves taunted him about it. "Tough? He's never been tough to me. Has he to you, Godwin? If he'd only manhandle us like he handled you guys we might try our luck. When he does, we will. Why don't you go and pull his nose, parson? You seem full of fight. I saw one o' your sort before, in a pulpit. Full o' girding on armor and fightin' good fights, he was, as long as he was snug in his talkin' box. A bloke who had been turned away from the church door 'cos he was a bit scammered pulled his nose and stole his hat afterwards, and the holy warrior never let out a peep. Why'n't you whisper in the gal's ear what you're always gassin' to us, if you want to start something? Let him start on us, and we'll try how tough he is. We're not fightin' your battles, though."

What the parson had been "gassin'" about was the mock ceremony he had been called to perform. The ship's company had been told about that. Some believed it; others, as simple as Nancy, believed that once a parson always a parson would rule, and the marriage would stand. Not that it made any difference. Mr. Martin and the Greek alone of the company had known Orson by more than repute before this voyage; and they knew how little any man's opinion mattered to Val Orson where his women were concerned. They knew also, which was much more to the point however, how like putting a match to gunpowder was meddling of any kind in his affairs; how like detonator to dynamite any interference with his female playthings.

Groves had no bowels for such interference. He could still feel those tremendous slaps on the face which, delivered flat-handed and apparently without heat, loosened his teeth and gave him a two days' nosebleed through mere concussion. It had been all over a glass of grog, too. If the steward had been a good fellow he would have given up that extra shot without fuss, and the skipper need never have heard about it. But now the steward was always at the skirts of the woman. She seemed to rule over the culinary department of the ship. There was never a chance for a sailorman to cadge a bit of cabin tucker any more. Sight of Nancy sitting there all alone, placidly working upon some trifling bit of silken stuff, peaceful and contented as any dairy cow in a meadow, prodded the ex-reverend ex-jailbird able seaman to try how profound that placidity might be.

"Any time you get tired of this bully who's neglecting you, Nancy, let me know," Groves said with a sidelong glance at Mr. Ringlin. "We'll take good care of you forward."

The girl was startled out of her customary tranquillity. She stared at the man, and her lips parted in a queer astonishment. He winked at her, as she recalled he had done before, just after wedding her to Orson. That stung her to wifely protest.

"You'd better not let my husband hear anything like that!"

The man laughed softly, and as he slithered along to the wheel flung over his shoulder at her the one word:

"Husband?"

SOMETHING in the tone that word was uttered in caused the girl to stare long after Groves had taken the helm. He only raised his eyes once afterwards, and she caught the glitter in them as they met hers. She turned pale, and her lower lip trembled. Gathering up her work, she ran below, and entered the skipper's stateroom without warning. Val Orson lay sprawled out on the settee, a trinket box on his chest, and his hands were full of pictures which seemed to be giving him a good deal of amusement. He glanced up as Nancy entered, gave her a half contemptuous smile, and applied himself again to his pictures. Nancy saw at once what they were. Girls. Every one a photograph. They were his gallery of conquests; his chamber of horrors; his garden of memories; according to his mood. Nancy had seen those photos before, in overhauling the drawers and lockers for body and bed linen. She had given them about as much attention then as she gave to his old boots and

oilskins. Little as had been her experience with men, she knew the reputation sailors had, and in her innocence was rather flattered to know that the man who had carried her off, her man whom she had won in wedlock, was no leftover from the game: that he had chosen her out of all those amazing beauties he had known, God knew how well. But even her docility was scarcely proof against this evidence that those beauties still held place in his interest.

SHE stood beside him, and her hand sought his. Again he flashed a glance up at her, and saw that her lips still trembled, but that her eyes were dark with resentment. Gently she took the picture he was holding.

"You are my husband, aren't you, Val?" she asked, a little brokenly. "There isn't any doubt of it, is there?"

A greenish light glittered in Orson's eyes. He sat up, gripping her around the waist. Gently she moved his hand, as if she feared its pressure. He drew her toward him, and the pictures fell to the floor.

"Tell me who has been putting that into your head, girl?"

"I want to know for myself, Val, because—"

"Never mind thinking up lies," he rasped, gripping her so tightly that she moaned. "Who's been talking to you?"

"One of the men said 'husband' in my hearing, and he said it as if he was sneering at me, Val. I didn't see who it was."

Orson laughed unpleasantly. He pulled her down beside him on the settee.

"That man's voice will get him into trouble, Nancy. And your ears are too sharp. You are my wife, aren't you?"

"I—I hope so, Val—" she stammered in a rush, and he regarded her queerly—"because I'm shamed forever if I'm not."

She tumbled down upon him, hiding her face at his breast. Val Orson, grinning over her head, patted her shoulder and soothed her with words that in no way matched his expression, which was one of amusement.

"Well, well! So little wifie is not sure of me, eh? Damned if you ain't a proper wife, Nancy. And you can just bet your silk socks I'm your husband. I'll talk to that parson by and by."

"Oh, it wasn't him!" cried Nancy, terrified for the man now that she had been assured that she was a proper wife.

"Don't bother to shield him, Nancy," Orson laughed, squeezing her to him. "I know the rat. Forget him a while. Look at this little baggage here. She jumped overboard when she found she was going to have a baby," and he picked up a photo of a little olive-tinted Eurasian with a frangipani blossom between her laughing lips. "Don't you ever try things like that. Here's another little—." He selected the photograph of the Malay girl. "Knifed me, that one did. Don't try that, either!"

"I wouldn't want to do either of those things, unless you deceived me, Val," Nancy replied soberly. The scattered pictures fell from Orson as he got up from the settee, and she began to gather them up. He watched her narrowly; and when she looked the least bit hurt at the number and variety of the collection, he interjected bits of spicy description about the subjects, and smiled cruelly as the stabs went home.

BUT Nancy was singing softly to herself when, her man having gone on deck, she again sat alone in the stateroom sewing on small pieces of Eastern silks. The pictures she had put away. They were only pictures.

As for her man, he had gone on deck with certain things in mind concerning a supposedly malingering Greek sailor and a presumptuous ex-parson; and those things were displaced in his mind by the serious attitude of Nancy. It was not the reminder of his benedict state that arrested him. Nor the manner of the girl's acceptance of the situation. It was that she believed she was his lawful spouse, and seemed proud of it. He had almost forgotten that ceremony.

A puzzled Greek sneaked forward unharmed after waiting an hour to see the master at the mate's order. A suspicious ex-clergyman helmsman warily dodged forward at the expiration of his trick, keeping an anxious eye upon the chuckling skipper and drawing no penalty for what he had stirred up.

"He's looney!" he told the crowd in the forecastle. "That wench has softened him up. Now's a good time to try out your ideas on him, Norris."

CHAPTER XII

DRY ROT

CROSSING a belt of squally weather the cargo worked loose in the hold. Only Orson's mad sail carrying could have made that possible, for lumber well stowed is hard to shift. Some great baulks of timber were squeezed up and out of the mass, so that when a fierce squall passed, after heaving the *Kestrel* down so that the sheerpoles dipped, with never a royal started, the ship did not come upright when the wind left her sails empty.

"Take the royals in, sir?" Mr. Ringlin asked, with an anxious eye upon another line of squalls up wind.

"Let everything stand!" Orson retorted. He too watched the weather sky. "Call all hands. Tell Mr. Martin to come to me in the main hold with his gang, and to bring hooks. Watch the ship. I want squalls to help her, not hinder her."

Orson sat on the hatch coaming, his feet dangling, so that he could at once direct the men below and be sure that no sail was taken in above. Ringlin clutched the poop rail, his youthful face not so brightly cocksure as when he joined the ship. He was beginning to believe that all the wild yarns told about Val Orson might not be imagination. A creaming line of sea ran toward the ship under a sky so clearly blue as to make any idea of danger seem foolish. Orson smelled it. That was the sort of squall that carried weight quite often. Soon he heard the moan of it. The *Kestrel's* sails filled and emptied in the first forerunning puff.

"Hold on below," he called to the men among the logs. Then all his attention was for the actions of the second mate. The Greek was at the helm. Always when a man was required somewhere else with two sound arms, the Greek was at the helm. The squall struck. The ship began to roll down, with a roar of sea at the bow and a roar of wind in the tall fabric of spars and canvas. Ringlin motioned to the Greek, whose teeth gleamed in a frightened grin, and the *Kestrel* was slowly luffed into the wind until her weather leeches quivered. Then she began to gather speed, and slowly lessened her perilous angle of heel.

"Carry on below," Orson barked, and growling men scrambled up from leeward in the hold, bruised and partly skinned by the down flinging.

With dogs and tackles, hooks and bars they fought with the heavy square logs, while the *Kestrel* leaped like a crazy thing through the hissing seas, her lee waterways foaming, her bows a smother of mist.

Orson glowered under the edge of the hatch. His ears told him all he needed to know concerning the performance of the ship herself. With Mr. Martin below, he knew that his actual orders would be carried out, if men could do the work. And work it was. Men slipped across the timbers, carried down to leeward with the logs in the lee lurches. They cursed that grim, silent figure sitting up there with dangling feet. But they toiled. Oh yes. They toiled because every man knew down in his heart that the grim silent man with dangling feet was man enough to do the work of any two of them.

Three men wrestled with one end of a great square log, at a disadvantage because of the low beams above them. The ship reeled, and there was an instant when men and logs seemed fated to go hurtling down to the lee side again, when the place for the log yawned a scant foot further up. The three men sprawled before an impatient thrust. Val Orson leaped among them, lifted the log end, and dropped it into place without apparent effort.

"Carry on," he ordered, and resumed his place in the hatchway.

Men swore in lower tones. The mate led them in a subdued sort of fashion. He expected Orson to storm and rave about the uselessness of modern mates and men. Instead, the skipper resumed his seat without a single comment. It wasn't right. It wasn't natural.

But Orson had seen something. The *Kestrel* was old. She had been well built. But during her passage through the years she had been owned by men who cared nothing for sentiment. In her best day some of her beams had been made in sections. That was a trick copied from the old slavers, and it spelled speed; no doubt of that. A stiff, rigid ship could never sail as fast as a ship that worked a bit under stress. So the slavers, to whom speed was everything, developed the idea, perhaps by accident of gunshot, of sawing the beams in two or three pieces, removing the middle piece whenever pressed for speed. And the idea carried

forward into legitimate pursuits. The *Kestrel's* builders had it. They built her with beams in three parts. Her early speed bore them out. But the folks from whom Orson rebought her, ignorant of all save earning power of a ship, replaced the cut beams with whole beams of very inferior wood. And now Val Orson was looking at the crumbling of the dry rot before his eyes. Pressed as the *Kestrel* was, her beams worked and moved against the fastenings, bits of rotten wood dropping with every strain of the ship.

Orson's face was grimly humorous. That dry rot was quite in tune with all the rest of the ship. He knew there were timbers that scarcely held the bolts. There were stanchions holding the bulwarks presumably, whereas actually the bulwarks held the rotted stanchions. The doublings of the masts had rotten spots. Every time the rigging was set up the fids crushed through the wood sides of the fid holes. And when pumps were manned, as often they were, bits of brown wood sometimes floated up on the spouting streams. Chips, working with the rest in the hold, looked up when a shower of wood fragments fell upon him from the beams, caught Orson's eye, and came up beside him.

"I didn't call you," Orson snapped.

"Thought maybe you was thinkin' of strengthenin' them beams, sir," Chips mumbled. "Purty bad, they be, cap'n, purty bad."

"When you get through down below, you can saw away the 'midship third of all the rotten beams," Orson returned with a grin. "She'll sail better the more she works."

Chips went back to his stowing of the logs and told the mate the Old Man was madder than ever. Orson went aft, and took out his record passage book.

THE *Kestrel* was behind her schedule. Her heavy freight of great timbers did not work down into trim as quickly as other cargoes. And while the squalls drove her forward tremendously, she was being overdriven. Yet Orson kept her to work. He had seen no other ships since leaving port; there was no way of comparing the *Kestrel's* speed with that of another vessel in the same weather conditions. All he knew was that his ancient clipper, with all his driving, lagged nearly a full day behind the best record to her present position on the chart.

Impatient for the mate to bring his men out of the hold, to know the stowage was secure again, he pored over his figures with moody eyes. His mania was not speed; not driving a ship beyond her limit; but adding glory to his cherished old *Kestrel* in her declining years, when other men had called her a has-been.

Tracing with his finger the thin line of her track down the chart of the Pacific, Orson referred from time to time to the passage book of Maury. He had sailed the best course, so far as was humanly possible. And the last position was circled much farther to the southward than any other ship save one had ever reached in an equal number of days. But that one other, that maker of records, was like a sand mote in his eye as he glowered down at the chart. He had, early in the voyage, brought the latest picture of the ship up to the chartroom from his cabin, and it hung there before him as he stood at the table.

The bulkhead on which it hung was part of the *Kestrel's* original structure. Of polished teak, finely fitted, carved at all corner supports, darkened and beautified with age, the wall seemed a fit shrine for the picture. Up high, where some damage of bygone days had been repaired with common stuff, the painted wood creeped and worked like the beams in the hold. But painted trash and creeping decay could not eradicate from Val Orson's mental vision the glorious picture conjured up by the framed presentiment hanging before his face.

Grand, upstanding forest trees. Waving fields of hemp. Grim scars in rugged hillsides yielding iron to men as grim. Flashing adze, and whirring saw. Blazing furnace, and clanging hammers. These, and the buzzing industry of swarming men, Val Orson saw in the vision of his old clipper's birth. Then he saw the long, sleepy ropewalk, with sitting boys turning spinning wheels; ropemakers walking backward down the sunny shedded aisles, bundles of dressed hemp in the aprons at their waists, spinning out the even threads which would afterward be laid up with top and tar into smooth, strong rope for the harnessing of the proud clipper. From the sunny ropewalk the picture changed abruptly to a grayer scene. Frowning walls, massive gates, uniformed guards. And men in convict garb picking oakum; drearily, day in, day out, week after week, and year after year, for a lifetime

perhaps, hard-faced hopeless men tearing old tarred rope apart on spikes driven into planks; cruelly tortured fingers shredding the broken strands, picking the fiber back into its original form. All this to make his clipper's seams tight against the sea.

Orson laughed when he thought of those convicts, toiling to make oakum for him. They didn't know him either. Men worked for him even without ever knowing him. It was well they did. He who had a way of commanding men, and women, to his will. But there were other little high lights in his vision. There were the cunning hands that had wrought the *Kestrel's* carven rails, and saloon panelling; her cabin furniture, and the great skylight with gilded kestrels taking flight from each corner, from whose wing tips was suspended the great swinging lamp in chains, itself a marvel of beaten brass and engraven silver.

But most of all, peering through the vision before his eyes, was the circled dot on the track chart which told him that his flying *Kestrel* lagged behind the record he had sworn to beat. He put away his book of passages, examined the barometer—not with fear for a bad weather portent, but with misgivings that the promise might not include wind, and stepped out on deck. Mr. Ringlin was about to enter the chartroom in search of him. Mr. Martin and the carpenter were putting the hatches back over the hold.

"Sail over the weather quarter, sir," Ringlin reported with a brief gesture. Orson started. No ship had been overtaken that day. Mr. Martin ascended the poop ladder while the captain scanned the distant sail through glasses. The eyes of everybody near were upon Val Orson as he swayed there on spread feet; and they all could witness the hardened jaw muscles working, the veins throbbing in the powerful neck, the tense hands gripping the binoculars.

"Easy to see what she is. That's the old *Huntress*," quoth Martin. "Seems to be overhauling us, don't she, sir?"

"That—old—wagon?" stuttered Orson, turning to glare at the mate. "She can't sail that fast! It's another, newer—"

"I know the *Huntress*," Martin insisted. "I ought to." He met the skipper's eye, and Orson grinned in spite of his chagrin. Over there where the old *Huntress* swam serenely along, a breeze blew which the *Kestrel* was missing. Wherever the *Huntress* had sailed, she must have held stronger, steadier winds than the *Kestrel* in order to be where she was. And she still glided ahead. Since her sail was first seen against the black of a squall, she had crept up measurably upon the bigger, faster ship.

"Take a gang and pump her dry," snapped Orson. His eyes glittered fiercely. "You, Mister," to Ringlin, "take watch tackles and sweat up everything all round. Watch yourself, there at the helm, or I'll give you a lesson. One o' you tell the steward I'll take my meals up here until that sail's lost astern. Jump, you!"

Men trooped around the decks from halyard to brace, and from brace to sheet, growling, cursing, never daring a song. And as evening drew on, the squalls ceased, the wind settled steady, hardened into a stiff half gale with a hint of chill in it. Val Orson watched near the wheel. He ate sitting on the steering grating. Sometimes he seemed to doze, sitting there. But helmsman after helmsman could swear that he never really slept. And that was the beginning of bitter times for the *Kestrel's* brood.

TO BE CONTINUED.

Letters *in the* SAND

A story of Murder and Gold in Africa

By H. Bedford-Jones

I

A WHITE man lay dead, twisted and contorted on the sand, showing he had died slowly. A bullet had ripped through him from back to breast; with morning the bloody sand had become black with clustered flies, and birds hovered. The sand was firm, salty, baked by the African sun, dampened by the Mediterranean three hundred feet distant.

Around him, as he lay dying, the man had traced letters in the sand, and died in tracing the eighth; his finger was still in its curve, and his outflung arm showed tattooing. Faint marks showed near the letters, as though words had followed them, but if any words were there the wind had effaced them. The eight letters remained, large, deeply ploughed—H T W S S T K S. These things happened on the lonely shore, three miles beyond the village of Temba, with Tripoli a dim blur in the west.

It was a week later, when Widson landed and went to the American Consulate. When he stepped into the office, the consul took one look at him, then bounced up.

"Widson! By all the gods, how are you?"

"Hello, Hank!" The bronzed first officer stepped forward and gripped the fist outthrust at him. "Heard you were here, and took the chance. Out of the service for good, eh?"

The consul looked at his empty left sleeve, and shrugged. "Sure. You're in the merchant?"

"Uh-huh." This brief reference to war years and naval service done, Widson took a cigaret, sat on the desk-corner, and eyed the consul. "First officer, *Bertha J.* We rammed one of your blasted Greek spongers the other night and went down—"

"What? You were on that craft?" exclaimed the consul. "Why, I thought the crew was taken to Malta?"

"They were," said Widson. "But a sponger offered me a lift here, so I took it. I can get a berth anytime, and need a vacation, and thought I'd see you. Can you stand me for a week?"

"You're durned shouting! Got a grip—no, being shipwrecked, you wouldn't. All right, I—"

Widson laughed. "Forget it. I have money, and my duffle-bag."

"Well, I've a spare room for you, and anything you need. Take you right up

now. We'll lunch in ten minutes, so let's go—what's the matter?"

Widson's gaze had fallen on a bit of paper on the desk. He turned it about and eyed it.

"What's this?"

"Puzzle—got the whole coast by the ears." The consul laughed. "Come along—tell you about it over luncheon."

TWENTY minutes afterward, over the table in the patio, the consul told his guest about the man who had been found dead in the sand down the coast. When it came to explaining the paper Widson had taken from his desk, he seemed rather embarrassed.

"To tell you the truth, Widson, I was trying to figure out those letters—"

"Mean to say you don't know what they mean?" demanded Widson.

"Nobody knows." The consul waved his hand. "I've learned the man was an American named Harden—a sort of drifter. Had a U. S. flag tattooed on his arm, so I buried him. He was down here looking for the *Kerguelec* treasure, I fancy. That's why all the fuss about him."

"Spill it," commanded Widson briefly. "Treasure? My nose itches, feller. How come?"

"Your nose isn't the only one," and the consul grinned. "The *Kerguelec* was torpedoed during the war—Frog boat with a lot of bullion aboard. Recently one or two articles have been picked up along the coast, relics of her. It's thought she may have been carried by currents in among some of the shoals and islands, in which case she'd be easy picking for somebody. In fact, a chap named Erdstrom has been here a month, looking about quietly—calls himself a Swede, but may be anything. I think he's a Frenchman, myself. Told me the other day he'd like to get hold of a white man who'd be reliable, to look about with him. He'd not dare trust a single black, or an Italian either. I think he's figured something from these letters, same as I have."

Widson smiled a little. "What have you figured?" he asked.

"That Harden found the wreck, was shot in the back, and left a message. I can't take it up, of course—my position and all that. If you'd like to spend your lay-off on it—"

"I'm on, by all that's holy!" exclaimed Widson eagerly. "What d'you figure this to mean, then? We'll split on the proceeds, feller—if you save my hide and gold from the wops and get me away."

"First find your gold. Give me that paper." The consul seized the paper, got out a pencil, and leaned over the table. "Nothing could be made out except these initials, savvy? I imagine they're the initials of words."

"Sure they are," began Widson, then laughed and checked himself. "I've figured out for myself what the words might be—but go ahead."

"Well, the letter K certainly stands for *Kerguelec*," said the consul seriously. "Call the last word 'safe'—that makes '*Kerguelec* safe,' a most important point. Nothing is known about Harden, but the tattooing shows he served in some navy if not ours, so we should adopt proper terms for the directions."

Widson said nothing, listening with an amused twinkle in his eyes. The consul jotted down the message as he had conceived it, and produced this result:

Hold Temba West by South. Sand thick. *Kerguelec* safe.

"Can't help you much, I'm afraid—one guess is as good as another," he said, tossing the paper across the table. "But help yourself. What would you make of it?"

"Something a lot different," said Widson. "Got a chart of the coast?"

"Yes. Come in the office."

THEY adjourned to the cool office, started the electric fan buzzing, and the consul laid out a large-scale chart of Tripoli and the adjacent coast. The spot where Harden had died was desolate enough, inside the usual shoals and half-submerged islets. After a good deal of figuring, while the consul hammered a typewriter, Widson rolled up the chart.

"Looks as though you had hit the message as near as we could tell," he said. "I don't see that I can do any better—"

The kavass, a huge black Sudanese, entered and saluted with word that Mr. Erdstrom was outside. The consul looked at Widson, who nodded. A moment later, Erdstrom entered the room and the consul introduced Widson. The two shook hands appraisingly.

Erdstrom saw a bronzed, alert-eyed,

smiling seaman. Widson saw a rather tall, thin man, brow oddly white from much wearing of a sun-helmet, dark and deep-set eyes, mouth rather weak but cruel enough to pass for strength. French? Perhaps; it was hard to say. The consul told who Widson was, and spoke of old acquaintance in the navy.

"I've spoken of him to you," he continued, "and he might throw in with you while he's here, if he'd suit."

"Anyone you'd recommend would suit," said Erdstrom in perfect English. A queer smile touched his eyes, but not his lips, as he regarded Widson. "You understand that I am hunting for this wreck alone, without a single servant?"

"I understand the circumstances," said Widson.

"I can offer you a partnership," said Erdstrom thoughtfully. "If we find the place, there is work to be done; we cannot trust a soul hereabouts. Greek spongers, blacks, Italians — all are to be shunned. We must go to a place I have in mind, and camp—we'll go by boat. I am leaving at nine tonight. I should be glad to have you as companion, if you wish to go."

"Good!" exclaimed Widson, and extended his hand. "Will you call here for me?"

"Agreed," said Erdstrom. He shook hands, and forthwith departed.

When they were alone again, Widson looked at the consul, a slight hardening perceptible in his steely gaze.

"That's Harden's murderer."

"Eh?" The consul started, eyes widening. "Look here, don't go off half-cocked—"

"I'm not," said Widson.

"You are. Erdstrom's been trying to figure out the meaning of that message with me half a dozen times. He had met Harden and liked him. For the past week he's been getting supplies and the right boat—a motor craft—"

"Bosh," said Widson. "He knows what those letters meant. He got the dope from Harden and then murdered him. I'm going into this and I'm going to get Erdstrom's hide."

"But why?" exclaimed the consul. "What's this beggar Harden to you?"

"Nothing—never heard of him before. Just the same, wait and see."

"Better get yourself a sun-helmet," said the consul, but Widson only smiled.

II

THE level rays of early morning sunlight beat across water and sand—just the two things. Creamy hummocks rose along the shore, hiding everything inland; sand-spits and islets cut off the coast-line; outside, the blue Mediterranean stretched illimitably.

A boat poked along a channel among the islets, touched the shoals, churned her way across, and at length came to rest on the shore of the largest sand-strip, where the yellow sands were heaped high and irregularly. The two men in her, clad in white shorts, shirts, boots and topees, climbed out and pulled her nose up.

All night Widson had scarcely spoken, asking no questions, holding the boat as directed by Erdstrom. He stretched himself and yawned.

"This the place?"

"Yes. Let's have a bite to eat and a talk, sleep until afternoon, then go to work."

"Right."

Their camp was quickly made—a brown tent on the seaward side to get the breeze. A solidified alcohol stove and their supplies were produced; in half an hour they had prepared a meal, and when cheroots were lighted, Erdstrom spoke.

"I suppose you know about the clue left by Harden?"

"The initials? Yes. You knew him?"

"Not at all," said Erdstrom, looking out at the sea. "But the initials showed me all. I had figured the approximate position, and it only remains to see if I fitted the right words to those letters."

Widson carelessly produced and handed over the paper given him by the consul.

"Anything like this?"

Erdstrom looked at it, and laughed. "Not bad for a guess. The man Harden was found near Temba, that village along the coast west of here. The bits of identified wreckage showed up near Temba, and the currents are charted. I figure the *Kerguelec* was broken in two, and the two final letters mean '*Kerguelec's* stern'. Eh?"

"They might also mean King Solomon," said Widson, and Erdstrom met his merry blue eyes with a short laugh.

"Or anything else. Well, here's what I've figured out—we may sleep on it." Erdstrom leaned over and traced the eight letters in the sand.

"A dying man," he pursued, "trying to leave a message, would not bother with unimportant words. We may assume that he tried to leave the essentials of his message alone, as one writes in a telegram. Two names are fairly certain, Temba and *Kerguelec*. Working from that premise, I make this message."

His finger spelled it out in the sand:

Holding Temba West, Safra South. Try for the *Kerguelec's* Stern.

"Huh?" Widson frowned. "What's Safra?"

"An oasis due south of here—Temba's due west." Erdstrom chuckled, delighted by his own ingenuity. "The lines come together, by the chart, at the north shore of this islet. I must take bearings, of course, and verify it. We'll work out the thing today and then see what luck we have late this afternoon. What d'you think of my reading the riddle?"

"You seem to have read it," said Widson with a nod. "Was that all you had to go on?"

The other man's dark eyes flickered to him sharply, swiftly, but Widson was looking out to sea.

"Of course," said Erdstrom. "With my own previous deductions."

"Well," and Widson yawned, "I'm due for a siesta. Need me to take any noon sights?"

"No, I can handle it."

WIDSON crawled under the tent-shelter and threw off helmet and boots. He did not go to sleep at once, however, despite his seeming; he was thinking about that sharp glance from Erdstrom, at his question. Erdstrom had not deduced the gist of that message by a long shot!

"What happened," said Widson to himself, "was about like this. They were working together, and Harden had something definite to go on. Erdstrom wanted the information, got it, and then shot him in the back. To the casual eye, it would seem that Harden left that writing, as he died, to broadcast what he knew and cheat Erdstrom. The large initial letters remained, the rest was effaced. Knowing the secret, Erdstrom could of course set in more or less correct words to the gaps. Well, we'll see later! I've no shadow of evidence—but I'll know I'm right if Erdstrom does go straight to the wreck. That means he discovered Harden's secret and murdered him."

It was long past noon when Widson wakened, to find the other man asleep at his side in the tent's shade. He crawled out and dressed.

The afternoon was declining, and they had not eaten since morning. Widson set to work with the canned heat, knocked up a meal, and called Erdstrom. He had not missed evidences that the latter had been busy during the heat of the day; sextant and compass were in sight, the sand was much trampled, and tracks showed that Erdstrom had crossed the hummocks more than once to the seaward shore of the islet.

"Anything in sight?" asked Erdstrom as he emerged.

"All clear," said Widson. "Come and get it! Ready for work?"

"Ready and eager," returned the other, and joined him in five minutes.

Erdstrom was eager enough, as his manner showed, for beneath his nonchalant air Widson was watching him keenly. The man was excited, anxious to be at the job; obviously, his work had borne results. Presently he unbosomed himself, speaking jerkily.

"Put a stick in the sand, over at the shore—saw it, did you? That marks the spot—the lines cross. Somewhere just off there, we should find the wreck, or part of it. That small islet to the westward makes a channel for the currents."

"All right." Widson stuffed his pipe with befitting care, lighted it, found it drawing well. "Say the word, and we're off. Nothing in sight to seaward. You don't think anyone's watching us?"

Erdstrom smiled, in his rather unhandsome fashion.

"Not much, after the course we took last night getting here! Anyone who could have traced us, would be a wizard. I'm ready—let's be off."

They adjourned to the boat, shoved her out, removed the tarpaulins, started her, heading from the inner channel to the seaward side. Neither man was talkative. If there was not actual dislike between them, there was a suspension of amenities; Erdstrom was nervous, mental, swift to sense unspoken things, and probably divined something odd in Widson's attitude.

Widson reflected that he knew nothing of his companion, beyond what the consul had said. They had not exchanged reminiscences, confidences, hints of previous years; it was as though a blanket hid all the past. More than once, Widson thought of the man lying dead in the sand, a bullet through his back, and the recollection held him alert.

They rounded out into the channel, and reached for the seaward side of the island, where a bit of driftwood showed erect in the sand. No sail marred the horizon. Erdstrom broke out a pair of lashed oars and got them ready, and Widson shut off the engine. Erdstrom laughed.

"It is something to have a man like you, my friend—no orders needed! We work together well. Yes, we'll have to seek along the channel and see what we can find."

Widson nodded and fitted his oar.

THEY cruised up and down, slowly, off the seaward shore, searching the clear waters below them, now and again Widson taking a sounding. The surprising depths of the channel here, which varied from two to forty fathom, showed how the currents scoured through. So far as the treasure was concerned, Widson figured it was all a wild-goose chase—yet there was always the chance.

"Even if we found her," he broke into speech, "the big job would be to locate where the gold lay. We'd have to blow her to pieces, and that'd mean everything down in the sand."

Erdstrom looked at him and grinned.

"The bullion? It is in an old wall safe in the captain's cabin."

"How d'you know that?"

Erdstrom shrugged. "I know. And the officer's cabins are not under the bridge, but aft. She was an old ship, you know. I can find my way about her."

"Huh!" said Widson. "You must have known her pretty well."

"I did," said Erdstrom, and then was silent. The curt words, and the look that came with them, served as warning.

Widson was no fool, and had the whole thing clear before him now. The man was French, all right, and knew the *Kerguelec*—knew everything about her. Probably he had been an officer aboard her when she was sunk, otherwise he would not have known where the gold was stowed.

"Sly old fox!" he thought to himself. "Kept quiet all these years, laid low, waited for his time, and now he's out to reap his reward! Well, there's only one way to get a confession out of him—that's to wait for the right moment, take him clear off guard, and surprise it from him. And if I don't pick the right minute, then good night."

They continued their steady and monotonous labor, hour after hour, without result. When the sun was at the western rim of land and sea, Erdstrom threw in his oar wearily and was about to order the return, when he checked himself abruptly and leaned over the rail, staring down. Widson joined him.

"See it?" demanded Erdstrom hoarsely. "Or is it a shadow—"

"Looks like it," returned Widson. "Can't tell now—it'll be dark in ten minutes. Get our bearings—wait, float an oar here to mark the spot!"

Whether that huge and shadowy bulk could be their quarry was impossible to say in the rapidly failing light. Sounding, Widson got a bare nine fathom. He used the line to make fast an oar, then stood up and looked at his companion. Erdstrom's eyes were blazing.

"Go back?"

Erdstrom nodded and relaxed.

The uncertainty of it was maddening, at least for Erdstrom; forced to wait until morning to verify the discovery, his rather volatile nature could not contain itself. Widson prodded him that night, deftly yet accurately, by scoffing at the possibility of having found the wreck so quickly.

"It couldn't be done," he affirmed. "Such a thing requires days, weeks, often months! We have struck on something else. To go rowing about for a few hours and pitch on it, would be a rank impossibility."

"No, no!" declared Erdstrom seriously. "What you say is true, and yet it is such things which do happen, my friend! It's all in the stroke of luck. And I deciphered Harden's message correctly, I think."

Widson wondered just what information he had pumped out of Harden before murdering him. Enough, certainly, to set words to the initials that Harden had left in the sand. Enough to find the wreck after a few hours' search, possibly—who could tell? Or perhaps it was the other way around. Perhaps Harden had done the pumping, and had learned too much.

The only important thing, so far as Widson was concerned, was that Harden had been shot from behind—rank murder, that!

Probably Erdstrom had said "my friend" to Harden, too, in that same oily tone of voice. Well, no matter. Widson patted the pistol under his armpit, and fell asleep.

Morning came. They were up before the dawn, both of them, and getting a bite to eat ere the sun rose. When the red disk of it loomed above the waters to the east, they were out in the boat, waiting near the floating oar. And when the level rays began to shoot down and pierce the watery depths, there was no need of looking farther.

The shattered after portion of the *Kerguelec* lay below them.

III

"WHO'S to go?" said Widson, puffing his pipe alight.

"I must go, of course, since I know just where to look."

So the man would trust him, then! Widson laughed to himself at that. No reason not to trust, of course, until the gold was brought up; just the same, it would be easy, and poetic justice, to leave Erdstrom down there. However, that couldn't be done without evidence, and the moment for confession was still far from here. It would come only with ultimate success or ultimate failure—and must be awaited.

They unlashed the tarpaulin, forward of the engine, and laid bare the diving equipment Erdstrom had rented from some Greek sponger. Widson looked at it and whistled.

"These Greeks don't keep their gear in shape, eh? Let's rig this pump and try her out a bit first—line, too."

They did it, being now resolved on working through the day, or at least until noon. In an hour's time they had rigged the pump and tested the gear, and Erdstrom was on the ladder ready to screw down his helmet. He had been down before now, he said, and was quite confident.

"Well, mind your signals!" said Widson. "I'll have to pump and haul both, and it'll be a man's job; but I'll not fail you. May be a bit slow getting you up, that's all. I guess we can manage it."

He was not so confident as he appeared, but the event would take care of itself, with luck. He wondered how Erdstrom would feel about going down—if he knew!

Very full preparations had been made by Erdstrom; he had neglected nothing, as though he had known absolutely he would find the wreck here. No doubt he had known it, indeed! He had a dynamite charge prepared, water-proofed fuse ready, and went down with it as though he were quite certain of the outcome.

Widson had a job to let him down at decent speed and still keep the pump clicking regularly, but somehow managed it. He breathed a sigh of relief when he got the signal that Erdstrom was grounded; now he had only to see that the line paid out clear, and to keep the pumps at work. He could not bother about keeping the lines taut; if Erdstrom allowed any slack, that was his own lookout.

Erdstrom was careful, however. That, reflected Widson, was the man's bane—every point covered, every detail provided for! Suddenly he started at a new thought. Could it be that Erdstrom had trailed Harden here? It was not like the man to go in for impulsive murder, and his knowledge of Harden had apparently been slight. Perhaps he had known Harden better than any one here supposed!

"I've hit the nail on the head," thought Widson, as he pumped mechanically, with one eye on the gauge and the other on the lines, the signal line passing over his arms. "Yes, sir, I've sure hit it! Well, no matter. The main thing—"

THE signal came unexpectedly, and swiftly, for Erdstrom had not been down ten minutes yet. Now Widson gave all his thought to the work in hand; fortunately the depth was so slight as to cause little trouble. He kept the pump-handles going with one hand and hauled in with the other, not trying to keep the lines shipshape. When at length Erdstrom got to the long ladder hooked across the gunnel, he managed to come up it himself, letting Widson pump. Then the helmet came off at last, and Erdstrom shook his head when Widson would have helped him in.

"No, I stay here—we are in luck, and one must push luck while it lasts," he said. "You light the fuse. Everything is fixed, ready! Do you understand? I had only to walk to it—the way smashed open for me! It is like magic, the way things are working out for us! Light it quickly!"

Widson shrugged and obeyed. The order

was madness, but Erdstrom, clinging there to the ladder in his diving suit, was mad with excitement; and consequences mattered nothing to Widson.

Five minutes later, the little craft heaved madly, as a huge bubble of water shot up beneath her and burst. Widson had fully expected to see Erdstrom shaken off, but the man's grip was good. The boat settled, and bits of wreckage came to the surface.

"Quick!" cried Erdstrom, his voice shrilling with impatience. "The helmet and the extra line and sling! We'll have it all done in half an hour or less. Nothing in sight?"

"Nothing," said Widson.

Another five minutes, and Erdstrom was on his way down again, Widson working with both hands at pumps and lines. By a miracle, he got them paid out without a kink.

The pumps clicked regularly, evenly for Widson knew how to handle them. What was going on below, he could not tell, and had no time to be gazing over the side. If Erdstrom fouled his air line, he was lost—but Widson knew he would not foul it. The man had prepared against everything to the very last detail.

"Everything," said Widson, "except the finger of a dying man and letters in the sand. He never dreamed any one would come along and take the part of a dead man, and fasten the murder on him! But it's not fastened yet."

He himself felt curiously aloof from the entire treasure business. It was unreal, almost fantastic, to find it in this manner. Unreal, too, that he should step into a partnership with Erdstrom; the latter could not have proceeded without assistance, but he might have had that without splitting the whole loot. Did he mean to split it? Widson strongly doubted this.

Then the signal, jerking his reflections back to the work in hand. Erdstrom came up very slowly and carefully; slight as the depth was, Widson took no chances of giving him the bends. The game could not be played that way!

Over the ladder and helmet off at last. Erdstrom helped rid himself of the suit before he spoke, then he looked at Widson and laughed.

"No questions? Have you no curiosity, no excitement?"

"Inside, not outside," said Widson. "Got it?"

"Yes. One pull and up it comes—all of it. Me, I am not cold and phlegmatic like you, my friend—where is that wine?"

"Push your luck before you celebrate," said Widson.

Erdstrom drew a deep breath and held his exuberant spirits in check. He was laughing, talking, jesting, all at once, and yet he held back from the line. When Widson went to it and gestured, Erdstrom came and joined him, almost reluctantly.

"It is hard to believe, and I have a feeling there is no luck in it," said Erdstrom as he took hold. "Contradict myself? Yes; now that I am certain, now that it is all over except to pull up this rope, I hesitate."

"Remorse, perhaps," said Widson. The other straightened up and stared at him oddly.

"Remorse! For what, then?"

Widson shrugged. "You're a man. Don't all men feel remorse at times—especially at times when they are about to seize upon sudden great wealth or benefit handed them by fate? We all feel that we don't deserve it, and we hesitate."

"Oh!" said Erdstrom. "Hm! Me, I am not a philosopher. Let us pull up, and then when we are ashore, break out that wine."

SO THEY fell to the line, hauling it in rapidly, and Widson saw his companion had made a shipshape job down below, because everything was clear and the weight came up readily. It grew as they looked down, and Widson perceived it to be a large box or chest.

Presently it was under them, and the weight of it told now, so that the craft tipped and lay gunnel to water; fortunately there was no sea. Widson examined the box and found it to be a chest, the line well fastened to the large handles at either end. The weight was considerable, and he suggested towing it in to shore, but Erdstrom protested vehemently.

"No! Get it aboard and take no more chances! We can lift it—"

"Get it to the stern, then—we can't lift it here amidships," said Widson.

Erdstrom had the strength of three men in him just then, and somehow they managed to get the chest aboard without sending the little craft over. Then Erdstrom went to pieces, momentarily, dropping like an exhausted dog above the dripping thing he had brought up from the deep. Widson said nothing, but got in their

anchor, started the engine, and sent the craft in by the channel to the other side of the islet, where they would be safe from observation.

Erdstrom was himself again when they reached camp, hauled up the nose of the craft, and trundled the chest ashore. He got out hatchet, chisel and jimmy, and went at the metal casket viciously, so that the clangor reverberated from the the yellow dunes and the blazing waters. It was nearly noon, but neither man thought of this or regarded it.

Although he wore himself out on that chest, Erdstrom smashed into it none the less, and with a deep breath of triumph, swung back the battered lid. Inside were little cloth sacks, dozens of them, neatly stored away. Water had got into the chest and had turned the papers and documents there into a sodden mass, and the little cloth sacks fell apart when touched; but falling, they revealed gold.

"British gold," said Erdstrom in a low voice, staring at the yellow coins. "Sovereigns! Hundreds of them, thousands of them! And all ours. Where's that wine?"

"Not yet," said Widson, and lighted a cigaret. "Going to take the thing back like this? Let those Italian chaps see it, and good night!"

"No, no! I have suitcases—the ones our provisions were in," exclaimed Erdstrom. "You are right—we must pack it all up at once and then sink the chest. If any one saw, we should be ruined after all! You are right, right!"

HE FELL to work again, and Widson joined him at the task. Presently they had three cheap wicker suitcases stuffed with gold—they almost fell apart, so heavy was the load—and laid aboard the boat. There remained a few dozen coins, which the two men shared, filling pockets and laughing. Then Widson got the two large bottles of champagne from the locker, and joined Erdstrom in the shade of their little tent.

"*Mon Dieu!* Are you not a little bit elated, excited, happy?" exclaimed Erdstrom as he watched Widson work at the wires of one cork. "Here you have become rich literally overnight; and you do not even snap your fingers!"

Widson smiled. "To some people, money isn't everything," he said. "This wine of yours will be devilish warm—better each of us take a bottle, eh?"

The corks exploded without much urging, and the two men drank. Erdstrom's nervous and intense nature reacted instantly; he had exhausted himself physically, and now he began to soar mentally. Widson knew the moment had arrived, and spoke negligently, lowering his bottle.

"How did Harden know about it?" he asked. "Too bad you had to kill him."

IV

HE RECEIVED an answer, but not the one he expected; gone at once was all his chance of accusing, of learning what had happened. For, like a flash, the heavy champagne bottle flew from Erdstrom's hand and the butt of it struck Widson over the left eye, barely missing the temple.

Knocked backward by the blow, Widson went sprawling under the tent. Erdstrom leaped to his feet, and a pistol whipped out in his hand; he fired pointblank, and the figure of Widson collapsed and went limp.

Erdstrom stood there in the sunlight, pistol in hand, helmet shoved back, and wiped the sweat from his eyes as he peered. A grin showed his white teeth, and he chuckled softly as he put up the weapon.

"So, you fool!" he observed. "And you thought I did not suspect, eh? You did not know that your words in the consulate were reported to me by the servants, eh? Well, your boasting is done, you swine—you and Harden were cut off the same pattern! And I remain, with the gold that is mine."

He picked up his bottle, but it had drained into the sand; he stooped for that of Widson, in which a little wine remained, and gurgled it down. Then he flung the bottle at the motionless shape inside the tent, laughed at sight of the thin trickle of red against the side of Widson's white shirt, and turned to the boat.

There he had work to do, despite the heat, for he dared take no chances. Widson's death was nothing; even if questions were asked before he could get away with his gold, he could make a statement and be done with it. But, if any Greek sponger or Italian fish-boat happened along, he could never explain this diving equipment. And he knew well enough they were all looking for him, because they would know about

his renting the equipment. If they found him here on the spot, he and his gold would be gone. If he got back to Tripoli by nightfall, his game would be won. But he must get back in good shape.

So he fell to work coiling up the lines again, replacing as though unused, making his craft shipshape. The suitcases he left out in the bow, merely flinging a tarpaulin across them. When he had finished the task, the full reaction seized him. He came staggering ashore under the weight of the blinding noontide heat, and made for the tent.

"Out of there, dead dog!" he exclaimed, seizing the ankle of Widson and pulling out the American's body. "Two hours—two hours and I'll get away—must sleep a bit—"

He fell unconscious—the last ounce of nervous force was drained. The sun had all but got him.

Barely an hour later, he came to himself, wakened, dragged out of the shelter and looked around; his face was darkened, his eyes were bloodshot, but the rest had refreshed him. He glanced at the body of Widson, face down, then walked to the boat and set himself at the bow, straining to shove her out. He accomplished it, and tumbled aboard. In the stern was balanced the iron chest, and as she floated a little out with the impetus of his shove, Erdstrom seized on this and toppled it overboard. Then he turned to the engine, and the hot quiet of the inlet was broken by the chattering sputter of the motor. Seated at the side wheel near the engine, Erdstrom turned her and sent her out along the channel, and in two minutes was gone around the spit of sand.

NO SOONER had the sound of his engine died, than Widson's body came alive. Sitting up, Widson emerged from the swarm of flies and then came to his feet. He staggered to the tent, retrieved his sun-helmet, and crawled into the shade. There he tore up his shirt and made shift to bandage a nasty bullet-scrape along his ribs with strips of the garment.

"I certainly put my foot into it that time!" he cogitated. "However, he'll be back—I can't lie around wasting time. Push your luck, as friend Erdstrom says!"

He went out, searched and found the side of a box which had contained provisions. With this and his own fountain pen, he retired again to the shelter of the tent.

Some little while later the puttering chug of the motor was heard, and presently the boat poked her nose around the end of the sand-spit hiding the channel. She came rapidly, at full speed; Erdstrom was standing at the tiller, bare-headed, his aspect frenzied, and from a livid countenance his eyes flamed wildly.

He shut off the engine too late, so that the craft went plunging at the sandy shore and ran her nose into it, flinging him off balance with the shock. He picked himself up and ran forward to where the suitcases had been covered with the tarpaulin; now only the tarpaulin remained, lying in a crumpled heap. Erdstrom looked at it, then leaped ashore and stood staring around. With a start, he perceived what was before him, and stood gaping.

There where the level sand had been, was now a heaped-up mound, and at the head of it a white flat board bearing letters. The man's eyes widened as he realized some one had been here. He glanced swiftly all about, saw nothing, and stepped closer to the mound, that was so like a grave. When he could read the letters on the board, he perceived it was indeed a grave, and he stood there blankly, eyes distended, staring, thunderstruck by the mystery of the thing. For he read on the headboard:

Here Lies
Hiram Widson
This Day
Murdered By
Erdstrom

A stifled cry broke from Erdstrom, and he whirled about, gripping at his pistol, his eyes probing the white stretch of sand with terror and horror in their gaze. He saw nothing, and checked himself.

"Gone!" he said thickly. "Gone—and yet I put it into the boat—and it's gone! And who has done this thing? Who buried him? Who took it?"

There was a laugh, dreadful upon the empty silence of the place, and a voice spoke.

"Harden. Murdered!"

No one was in sight. Erdstrom cursed, ran to the tent, tore it away, to show only sand. He glared around, his face suffused with blood, purpled. A sudden fierce, wild yell burst from him as he shook his pistol in the air.

"Answer me! Devil, swine, dog—where are you? Where is my gold? Who took it out of the boat?"

A soft, quiet chuckle came to his ears. He whirled again, saw no one—then looked up and his jaw fell. On the crest of the seaward hummock of sand behind him sat Widson, naked to the waist.

With a choking cry, Erdstrom broke into a mad, scrambling run toward the figure above. He rushed up the hill of loose sand, slipping, struggling along frantically, a storm of curses on his lips, frenzy in his eyes. When he was nearly to the top, Widson fell over backward out of sight.

Erdstrom gained the crest, panting heavily, and his jaw fell. There was no one in sight. With one fearful cry, he hurled himself forward, plunged down the declivity at a mad run, leaping in great bounds toward the shore below. He dropped his pistol, tore the shirt from about his throat, passed the bit of driftwood he had set for a marker, and went headlong into the blue waters. For a moment his head bobbed there, and then it went under—and did not come up.

"Poor devil! The sun—and conscience—maddened him," muttered Widson. He shook off the loose sand that had drowned him, as he sat on the dune, and for a space sat watching the waters below, but Erdstrom did not reappear.

Presently Widson sighed, rose, and turned toward the boat on the other side of the islet. When he came to the pseudo-grave, he kicked aside the sand and disclosed the three suitcases.

V

IT WAS midnight when Widson and three porters reached the consulate and knocked up the representative of the United States. The porters deposited a heavy suitcase each, received a ten-lire note each, and departed into the night. Widson went into the office with the consul, and thankfully threw off the tarpaulin which served him as shirt.

"Hello! Hurt?" exclaimed the consul, who was still sleepy.

"Nope, just barked," said Widson, gratefully accepting the bottle and siphon shoved at him, and pouring a stiff one. "Those three grips have the gold in them, by the way."

"The—*what?*" The consul opened his eyes at this. "Gold? Mean to say you've actually found the stuff? Are you spoofing me?"

"Nope. It's there," said Widson, and downed his drink. "I want you to take charge of it and put the thing through legally—I'm not out for this stolen money stuff, old sport. Savvy? What belongs to me, can come to me; my pants pockets are full anyhow, which is enough for the present. Harden and I share alike in it. Look up his heirs, if he has any. If he has none, his share can come to me. Suit you?"

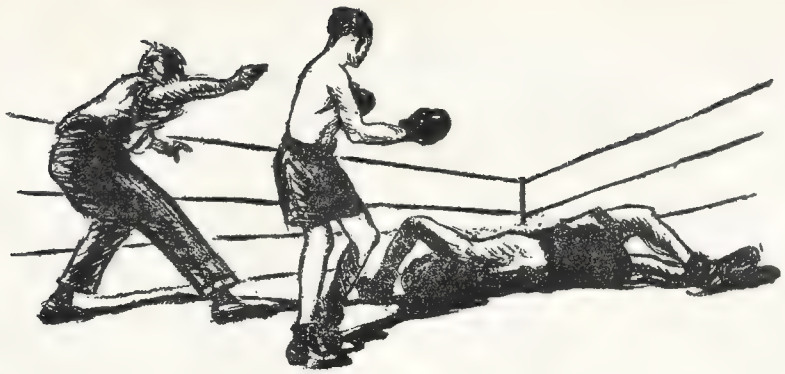
The consul gulped. "My gosh, man! You've got it—just walk away with it!"

"Damned fine advice from a consular officer, huh?" Widson grinned wearily. "No, thanks. Can't be done in this case. You hew to the line, feller, and I'll take whatever chips fall my way."

"But where's Erdstrom?" The consul looked suddenly startled. "You didn't—"

"Erdstrom," said Hiram Widson thoughtfully, "got a touch of sun. I didn't touch him. Last I saw of him he was traveling eastward—trying to walk to Jerusalem. I fancy he's learned a few things by this time. Well, here's to Harden, whoever he was! Time for refreshment, old chap—"

His head fell forward, and he was smiling when the consul picked him up and called the servants to lug him off to bed.



The Book FIGHTER

A Prize Fight Story with a New Idea

By CARL H. CLAUDY

"NOW, Billy, you watch."

Billy Edwards ceased the practice of his pet economy, which was the manufacture of paper spills, as Mr. Marlowe spoke quietly.

"I'm watching," was his prompt reply. "But you can hand me one on the jaw if a swell restaurant ain't a funny place to look for scrappers!"

Billy Edwards glanced around the gold and purple dining-room, at the black-coated orchestra in the gallery, the half-clad girl doing her turn in the noisy cabaret. Then he brought his small red eyes to rest on Mr. Marlowe, as he fingered his little pile of paper spills made from a page of the menu. There was a mixture of puzzlement and contempt in the glance. But Mr. Marlowe did not see. He was eyeing a waiter gliding, rather than walking, between the tables.

"That's the guy," he whispered. "Keep your eyes on him."

Edwards saw a dark-skinned, thin-faced waiter, with very black eyes and black hair. He moved lightly, easily, on his feet. His hands, muscular and broad, were not the soft hands of the typical waiter, nor could the rather poorly fitting dress coat disguise a pair of broad shoulders. As he walked swiftly to their table, Mr. Marlowe moved his arm, and a heavy carafe of water fell to the floor. Edwards drew back from the impending crash with an exclamation. But there was no crash. With a movement as deft as if it had been rehearsed, the waiter stooped, caught the carafe just as it touched the floor, and restored it, unbroken.

"There!" cried Mr. Marlowe, triumphantly, as the waiter passed on. "Ever see anything quicker?"

"Humph!" was Edwards' answer. "I don't get you. What's that got to do with his being a fighting man?"

Mr. Marlowe pulled a book from a side pocket.

"This is a Laboratory Manual of Applied Psychology," he stated.

"Applied—who?"

"Psychology. Study of the mind. This is the book that taught me how to clean up on Spider Kelly. Now, listen to this." Mr. Marlowe turned the pages rapidly. " 'Reaction time—the interval between receiving a stimulus and acting upon it. It requires an appreciable and measurable interval for a stimulus, applied to any nerve, through any of the five senses to reach the brain, and cause it to act, and for the impulse sent out by the brain to be

translated into muscular action. This interval differs with the variety of stimuli employed, with the individual, with the individual's attention, and the point upon which it is concentrated.' "

"Sounds like Greek to me," interrupted Billy Edwards. "Look here, Marlowe. I've handled fighters all my life. And I've always had winners, except Spider, and he boozed. I know what makes a fighter, and it isn't a book! What do you want, and what's the juggler got to do with it?"

"I want you to take that chap, Pierre Ladeux is his name, and train him. He's got a reaction time like a streak of light. I'd do it myself but—"

"Oh, you would, would you? Well, you can, for all of me. I don't believe in your books nor your 'reaction time.' I do know you can't make a fighter with words, nor tell him from a plain gink by a book. Why, listen, kid—I've been thirty years in the game. The only fighter who is any good is one who has science and a punch and nerve and can stand the gaff. If he's got all these, but has a glass jaw, he's only a preliminary man. He's got to have nerves which won't flinch if you hit 'em with a sledge hammer. What does the book know about that? Nothing! Take my advice, don't bet real dollars on a man because he can catch a water-bottle like a juggler!"

"That lets me out, then." Mr. Marlowe's voice was relieved. "I didn't want to hurt you, Billy. Now, you won't care if I train this guy and he knocks Sleeper Siggers through the ropes?"

Edwards laughed, as he rose.

"I'll trust Sleeper to take care of his end of it. Obliged for the dinner. Go as far as you like. But take my advice and make spills out of your book. It's all it's good for."

MR. CHARLES MARLOWE, patron of the prize ring, well known on the turf, backer of Gilson, the boy wonder at billiards, liked money, and was willing to spend money to get it. He believed that Sleeper Siggers was about "through" in the ring. He had won his latest fight, and Mr. Marlowe had kicked himself for not taking the long, instead of the short, end of the bets. But Sleeper had perceptibly slowed. Mr. Marlowe had been perfectly honest in bringing the French-Canadian waiter to Billy Edwards' attention—Billy had put him "next" to too many good things to play him a rough trick now. But with Edwards fairly out of the way, Marlowe thought he saw his road clear to some easy money. So he parted from the trainer, and went back to the Richterhoff and Pierre Ladeux.

"Oh, waiter!" he called to Pierre.

"*M'sieu?*" was the quick answer, as the dark-skinned man bowed over the table.

"Your name is Ladeux?"

"*Oui, m'sieu.*"

"You are a woodsman, a lumberman, trapper?"

"*Oui, m'sieu.* From ze Hudson Bay contree."

"You like this—being a waiter?"

"Eet ees better zan zat I should starve, *m'sieu.*" Pierre Ladeux smiled ruefully. "I come out here wiz ze fine skins—*oui*—ze silvaire fox. I sell heem much money. Zen I los' eet. I am rob'. Now I mus' work or—I not eat. In Quebec, once, I sarve at ze hotel. Zis waitaire, zey stop work—strike, you call eet? *Ouil* So I am ze waitaire!"

"You are very quick."

"*Ouil M'sieu* have foun' zat out. I see—he knock ze sings from ze table—las' week, two days ago, tonight. Always I am zere—I catch heem. But why?"

"The first time was an accident. The others were on purpose. Listen, Pierre. I believe I can make some money with you, for both of us. Want to try?"

"I will do anyzing to make ze money—so eet ees not ze steal!"

"Taking money from wilfully blind trainers of worn-out scrappers is not stealing, Pierre!" Marlowe's voice was reproving. "Don't look like that, Pierre," he went on, laughing a little. "Of course you don't understand. What time do you close here?"

"Oh, late, *m'sieu*—veree late. But I am, what you call, off at twelve of zee clock.

"Come around here." Marlowe laid a card on the table, "and I'll tell you the rest of the story."

LADEUX strode catlike into Marlowe's very quiet apartment. He reminded Marlowe of a feline, with his noiseless tread, not the sneak of the waiter, but the silent step of one used to woods paths. There was an air of being ready for fight or flight in any direction, and Marlowe judged his odd guest was not such a fool as to trust

a stranger too much at first sight. He was pleased that Pierre did not accept him as benefactor in advance of the fact. Nor did he fail to note with pleasure that Pierre sat down without waiting for an invitation when Marlowe greeted him and seated himself. This man had no waiter's heart!

"Tell me something about yourself, Pierre," Marlowe began.

"Yes?" Pierre put a rising inflection on the word. "*M'sieu* is most kind. But, how you say—I no want for to be bad manners—for why?"

"Oh!" Marlowe grinned understandingly. He liked queer people and queer ideas and this struck him as queer. "You think I should tell you what I want of you, first?"

"*Oui, m'sieu*!"

"Well, that's fair enough. You saw that man I brought to dinner, tonight?"

"*Oui*, short, fat man—face lak oak."

"Like oak?"

Pierre waved his hands, struggling with an idea his limited English would not express. "Rough," he answered, "rough, lak oak bark; tough, lak oak wood."

"Hard, in other words!" Marlowe finished. "Billy is all right; his is a hard trade. He trains men to fight—fight with gloves, you know, in a ring, for money; prize fighting! Well, he has a scrapper, chap called Siggers—Sleeper Siggers. Slowing up. Still mighty good, but hasn't more than a year or so left. I know. It's in the book—but never mind that. I want a man to beat him. I think you are the man. But before I tell you why I think so, I want to know something about you. I believe I can make some money for both of us. I don't mean you any harm, old top, and any of 'em will tell you I am a square guy. So spill it!"

"Speel eet?"

"Yes, give up. The life story, you know—about yourself."

"Oh! I trappaire, huntaire, French-Canadian, ze beeg woods. I get ze silvaire fox. But it ees not only zat, why I come here. It ees my face."

"Your face?"

"*Oui, m'sieu.* It is bad times. Ze game, she ees not plenty. I go in beeg woods, logging. Loggaires, zey fight, all ze time. Marie, she no lak. She lak my face. *Jeunne fille, m'sieu*, zey like ze face, nice, smooth, what you call—no marks!"

"I suppose you are telling me something," mused Marlowe, "but I be damned if I know what. Game was scarce, you went with loggers, they fight, the young lady likes your face like it is; so much I get! But does logging hurt the face?"

"Loggaires fight! No' lak you mean, fight; zey fight hard, mean—fight to hurt. Loggaire get man down, jump on hees face. Caulks in boot, stick in ze face, mak holes et beeg black marks! Marie, she say *'non'!* Say she no want her man wiz marks lak zat! So I bring ze skins—mak ze money, but I am rob'!"

"She was afraid you'd get in a fight and some one would jump on your face with caulked boots and twist the caulks? I get you. I have heard of that kind of fighting. Were you afraid, Pierre?"

"I? But *non, m'sieu.* Nevaire am I 'fraid of any man. No loggaire evair put me down; I take head out of ze way! But woman—woman is, how you say? Funnee! An' when she say *'non'*, wat ees to do? So I come!"

MR. MARLOWE arose and poured himself a drink from a decanter. Then he offered it to Pierre.

"*Merci, m'sieu,*" was the quiet answer. "Eef you will 'scuse me?"

Marlowe drank, well pleased. Better and better. Then he turned around in his chair and faced the dark-skinned man across from him.

"I don't know if I can make this plain to you, Pierre, because I don't talk French. But I know something of the fight game as we play it. We have men fight in a square ring. They fight with gloves—five-ounce gloves. Surely you know what a prize fight is!"

"*Oui, m'sieu.* To fight for ze money—zat is what ze great Carpentier did, only zat Jack Dempsey, he ees too beeg!"

"That's it, exactly!" Marlow grinned again. "We gave a couple of other reasons, too, but that will do.

"Well, as I was saying," he went on, "I know something of this game. And I believe in science, rather than just brute strength. It was a certain doctor who made me a lot of money by showing me why one Spider Kelly couldn't win, and I believe he will show me why you can win. For you are quick, Pierre; very quick. That was why I brought Edwards to see you; I thought I could make him see it.

But he laughed. Now, what I want is this. If you are willing, we will go tomorrow to see the doctor I spoke of. He will show me, and show you, too, if I am right, that you are unusually, abnormally, fast; quick. If you are, you can be made into such a fighter as will tear Mr. Sleeper Siggers limb from limb, and we'll both make a lot of money!"

"I no understan'. You want I should fight, for ze money?"

"Exactly."

"Much money?"

"If the doctor agrees with me that you are what I think you are, you'll—how much money did you get for your skins?"

"Two zousand dollaires, almos'."

"Well, you'll make so much money you can throw silver skins around for tips!"

"I mak so much—one fight?" Pierre's eyes were puzzled.

"You'll fight several times and the least you will make will be more than that!" assured Mr. Marlowe. "You can go home and marry Marie and have silver fox skins for souvenirs!"

Pierre Ladeux thought this over for a minute.

"You talk, how you say? Funee!" finally said the Canadian. "But you have ze straight eye. We go see zis doctaire man, what you say he do? We fin' out eef I am ze Canadian Carpentier!"

PAINT scaled from the door which opened into the brown stone, old-fashioned house in the thirties. But the interior belied the outside. Inside was painstakingly neat and clean, if bare, and the room into which they were ushered was obviously a work room, and one fitted with no cheap assortment of tools. Glass tables supported various delicate tubes, wires and bottles. A Helmholst electric machine flanked an X-ray apparatus, shrouded in one corner. An elaborate electrical switchboard occupied one side of the room. Shelves in a corner held many books, and a cabinet displayed neatly labeled bottles, all the same size. A short, stout figure came toward them as they entered.

"Good evening, Dr. Kane," began Mr. Marlowe. "This is my subject, Mr. Ladeux. As I 'phoned you this morning, I want to know how fast his reaction time is, responding with a blow of his fists."

"Prize fighter?" Dr. Kane looked from under bushy eyebrows in surprise. Pierre had not a fighter's face.

"Not yet. But—give him the same test you gave Spider Kelly, the time you showed him why he couldn't fight any more."

Dr. Kane turned to his table and began to do something with the apparatus on it.

Marlowe glanced about the room. It was odd that regular ring men didn't come to this laboratory more. Science would save beatings for a lot of fellows who thought they could fight. So simple, too. Billy Edwards had experience, and a certain rough ability. But his method of developing a fighter was to punch it into him. If he stood it, he made good. If he couldn't stand it, he got out. Edwards had laughed at the idea of the book of psychology finding a prospective world beater in a restaurant. Well, of course he didn't know yet. But Ladeux had seemed abnormally quick. He would know for a certainty in a few minutes.

Dr. Kane set up a delicate piece of apparatus. There were wires, a glass box with a cylinder and clockwork, an electric light, a cushion against a rigid support, a slender little rod with a round white target-like tab upon the end.

"Now, Mr. Ladeux," began Dr. Kane. "I think we can do better if you will take off your coat."

Pierre's face showed no comprehension but he removed his coat. Apparently to assist him, Marlowe took hold of one shoulder. The flowing muscle beneath did not surprise him.

"I knew it as soon as the hotel people told me where he came from," he muttered. "You can't live in the North without muscle."

"You see this light?" Dr. Kane continued. As he spoke, he pressed a button. A small electric bulb at eye height glowed yellow at one end of the table. "Well, when you see the light glow, I want you to hit that cushion with your fist, as hard as you can. It's soft—it won't hurt your hand. But I want you to strike this little target on the rod here, with your fist as it punches forward. See? Like this!"

Dr. Kane stepped beside Pierre and drew back his arm. He struck out smartly, hit the rod, which gave readily, then landed on the cushion with a resounding thump. As he did so, there was a sharp click from the table.

"*Oui*—I understan'—but, what *ees* eet?"

"Measuring apparatus. When I light the lamp, the recording machine"—the doctor pointed to the glass case in which was a cylinder and a tiny mechanical pen—"makes a mark. When you hit the rod, the recording machine makes another mark. The recorder tells me the time between the instant you saw the light, and the instant you hit the rod. It's a measure of how quick you can see, think and act."

"Eet ees veree curious. But let me try!"

Pierre stepped forward and struck out. His fist hit the pillow smartly.

"Eet ees easy."

"Yes. Try again." Dr. Kane took hold of the button. "But hit only when you see the light."

Mr. Marlowe watched, fascinated.

Billy Edwards would laugh. He had laughed when Dr. Kane had told Spider Kelly that the reason he could never fight successfully again was because the typhoid fever had slowed up his reaction time. Yet Spider never had fought, successfully, again. Billy Edwards said "too much booze." But it hadn't been booze, and Marlowe knew it. It was slow nerves, and this man and his funny little machine had told him so. Mr. Marlowe remembered the snug little fund Spider's last fight had netted him, and his eyes gleamed. Now, he would know whether this was a real opportunity, or whether the French Canadian's remarkable quickness of hand was just an accident.

THE light flashed, and Pierre hit. It flashed again, and again at odd intervals, and every time the light flashed, there was a thump of a big fist against a pillow. The little rod with its white target was a blur in the air under the swift strokes.

"There—that ought to tell." Dr. Kane removed the glass case from the chronograph. "The average of those times—why—"

He stopped, staring in surprise.

"Well, what's the answer?" Mr. Marlowe was impatient.

"Either something is the matter with that chronograph, or Mr. Ladeux is abnormally quick," was the quiet answer. "The usual chronograph time between seeing the light and hitting the target is somewhere between 170 and 290 *u*—*u* being the thousandth part of a second. Your friend Kelly took about 370 *u* to respond."

"Yes, but *this* record, man—what is it?"

"His greatest interval is 150 *u*. His shortest interval is 85 *u*. Every time he hit, he hit quicker. That's natural. But his slowest is faster than any other man's fastest—that I ever tested. The machine must be wrong. Let's try again."

The second test was like the first, except that the longest interval between sight of flash and blow of fist was 120 *u* and the shortest 80 *u*.

"I have never seen anything like it." Dr. Kane's voice was quiet, though his eyes flashed.

"That's fine, as far as it goes," Mr. Marlowe looked somewhat dissatisfied. "But I don't understand the times. Surely a man hits quicker than in the tenth or twelfth part of a second. I can hardly believe even old slow Spider took thirty-seven hundredths of a second to respond!"

"That's because you confuse a laboratory experiment with actual practice," Dr. Kane explained. "Here, the subject sees a light, knows he looks for a light, and waits for the light. Then he hits. The stimulus comes suddenly, and with a small shock of surprise. That must be overcome before the actual blow is struck. In a fight, each man is constantly watching, not for a sudden and surprising light, but for some expression, some tightening of muscles, some change in attitude, or a combination of them all, which shows that a blow is coming. Then he sees the blow start. His mind is tense, keyed up to this one thing. His response is much faster—how much faster I don't know. You can't put a machine to work on a fighter in action!

"But these chronograph records are accurate as a means of comparison. This man is as much faster in hitting than is Kelly, as 80 *u* is less than 370 *u*. You can give *u* any value you please; call it one second or one millionth of a second; the proportion holds good."

"Oh, well. I didn't understand. I wonder what makes this man so quick, then?"

"How can I say? Environment, training, special aptitude. Can you account for your own quickness, Mr. Ladeux?"

"I deed not know eet," was the smiling answer. "In my lan' we mus' be queek or somezing catch us—hurt us—ze falling tree, ze leaping caribou, ze runnin' wolf—we *mus*' be queek."

"A FIGHTER," observed Mr. Marlowe, "must not only be quick at hitting, but he must be quick at getting his vital parts out of the way. I have a friend in the fight game, Doctor, who says that a man may have everything, but if he has a glass jaw, he is no good."

"What, may I ask, is a glass jaw?" asked Dr. Kane.

"Glass jaw," explained Mr. Marlowe, "is the affliction of the man who can't stand being hit on the point of it. Some of 'em can and some of 'em can't. If they can, they come up smiling under punishment, and you have to wear 'em down by hitting them in the middle. If they can't, any lucky punch may put 'em out. I don't know whether this lad has a glass jaw or not. I probably won't know until some one cracks him a good one. But you ought to be able to tell me whether he can move his head as fast as he can his fists. Can't you rig up that apparatus so it will show how fast he can wiggle his head? I mean, so it will show the reaction time between a light stimulus and the movement of his head to one side or the other."

The doctor thought a moment. "I don't see why not," he answered. "But wouldn't it be easier to give him a stiff punch on the jaw and make sure he can stand it?"

"And scare him to death?" Mr. Marlowe allowed as much contempt as he dared to creep into his voice. "No, thank you! Rig up that apparatus so he can respond with his head, if you can. The old pocketbook can stand it, I guess."

While Pierre watched, fascinated, and Mr. Marlowe affected a blasé air he did not feel, the doctor tinkered with his machinery. When he had finished he explained.

"You sit here, in this chair," to Pierre. "When you see the light flash, move your head to one side, quick—as quickly as you can. It will hit first this target here, then the cushion on the back of the chair. Sit sort of sidewise."

"But my head! I always keep eet out of ze way—Marie she no want I have ze marked face—"

"That's all right, Pierre," soothed Marlowe. "We are going to make sure your face will stay just like Mademoiselle Marie likes a nice face to be. You do what the doctor says, like a good chap."

So Pierre, obedient, sat in the chair and watched the light and snapped his head from side to side as it flashed. And he was pleased when Marlowe was pleased, although he only half understood why.

"Reaction time with the head fast as light!" announced the little doctor, examining the chronograph record. "Slower than the fist, of course, because the neck muscles are not so strong as the flexors and extensors of the arm. But very, very fast, at that!"

There was a quiet conversation which Pierre didn't hear, and an exchange of a couple of yellow bills. "Just one thing, Doctor," finished Mr. Marlowe. "This is a professional matter. I ask your professional confidence and that you tell no one of our visit or its result."

"I will tell no one," answered the doctor. "But, I'd like to be there and put up a bet when the fight comes off!"

"You are on, Doc, you are on!" cried Mr. Marlowe, delighted.

MR. MARLOWE went around whistling. He spent his mornings at a private gymnasium where a lithe, clean-cut, dark-skinned man was making enormous strides in the art of boxing. His afternoons he put in talking fight at the Gloved Hand Club, where one could find all sorts of managers, professional seconds, men who would arrange a fixed fight if you paid them in advance, hangers-on, near fighters, used-to-be fighters, fighters-to-be.

"How's the waiter coming on?" Billy Edwards asked him, a month after Dr. Kane's test.

"Oh, he shapes up pretty fair. Some day I'll ask you for a crack at Sleeper."

"Your man got any coin behind him?"

"He'll have the coin, don't worry. Come around, some day, and look him over."

But Billy Edwards had his own methods of learning about a rival promoter's fighters.

"I don't believe in your book-made fighter. There's only one way to make a good one, and that's punch it into him," he was fond of telling Marlowe. "Take my advice, kid, and don't back your Frenchman too heavy just because the book says so, or because he can juggle bottles of water. But if you've got to lose your money—lose it to me."

And Marlowe was quite content. For Pierre Ladeux "shaped up" wonderfully. The tale told by the strip of paper on the chronograph was being rewritten with eight-ounce gloves and the soft plop-plop

of leather against bare skin. Marlowe was no piker, and Pierre had the best training quarters, the most able instructors, the most stolid of sparring partners. He needed the latter, for it was evident from the first day that Pierre was going to be hard to land on, and was provided by nature with a reasonable "kick in both hands." He was not entirely new to the art, but Marlowe insisted that he learn from the beginning. For a few days, while he mastered the mysteries of his left hand, and learned what his right one was for, and the difference between a blocking defense and a defense which was all in "carrying it to the other fellow," his partners had easy times. Spider Kelly, in charge, saw to it that they did not hammer Pierre too hard, and his partners saw that they were not hammered too hard.

But after a week, this became difficult. Pierre was stepping inside leads and landing either or both gloves about where he pleased. He learned to drop his head behind one projecting shoulder and sway from the waist so that a vicious uppercut just whizzed by his nose. Then there was the smart smack of a well-padded fist and a grunt from the man who stood opposite him. Inside of two weeks there were quarter bets among his three sparring partners as to who could land a right cross, and at the end of a month Spider himself tried to get one over through five three-minute rounds, and failed. The black head was always just an inch too far to the side. Spider took half a dozen stiff ones in the jaw, got a nosebleed and a puffed eye, but he did not land that right cross.

"I'm, just telling you, boss," he said to Mr. Marlowe, nursing a very sore face, "I'm old and slow, but I'm not so slow I can't put one wallop over once, even with the best of them. That boy there—he ain't there where your glove is. I'm telling it to you straight—I've had 'em on with the best at a hundred and fifty-eight, and I've never seen the guy with the defense this chap's got—and he don't seem to care how hard he hits, either."

Wherefore, Mr. Marlowe whistled.

OF COURSE Mr. Marlowe was much too wise to try Pierre out first in New York. He and Pierre disappeared for a month. Close watchers of the sporting columns may have noticed that a certain "French Kid" was walking away with half a dozen preliminaries in the West—Kansas City, Milwaukee, and New Orleans fans had a treat which they did not half appreciate in seeing an unheralded and unknown boy dispose of his six round go on points. The first two were knockouts, but Marlowe soon stopped that. "I know you have a wallop, Pierre," he instructed, "but there isn't any use letting the rest of the world know it. Box 'em, Pierre; and if they say you are a cream puff lad, so much the better when it comes to the odds with Sleeper."

"Cream puff? What ees ze cream puff?"

"A cream puff, my friend, is a sort of dessert, much used as a missile in motion pictures, and as an alibi by those who were not looking for what they got! A cream puff fighter is one who, in the language of the always interesting but not always authentic fight reporter, lays his gloves gently upon the face of his opponent, in a way to annoy him without hurting him. A cream puff hitter can't hit!"

"But for why? I can hit—I knock heem out, biff!"

"Yes, you idiot; I know you did! But I don't want Sleeper to know it! If you have a reputation as a cream puff artist, Sleeper will pile into you rough shod. You don't know it yet, friend Pierre, but the fighter who does the leading leaves the openings. The fellow who will smash into you from the bell is willing to take what you send so he can give you what he's got! If Sleeper thinks you can't hurt him he'll rush. Your defense will save you, but what is going to save Sleeper? Go easy on the knockout stuff, and let's hope that Billy Edwards doesn't note the account of these first couple of prelims."

Mr. Marlowe nodded happily when Pierre brought his dark skin unbruised from go after go, and carried his face as clear from stain or break as if he was still a waiter instead of a fighter.

"Eet ees so easy, zis fight game," he announced smiling happily. "Zey hit—I step one side, zen I hit, ze referee, he hold up my han', and we have ze money. Eet ees wat you call—ceench?"

"You are never afraid, are you, Pierre?" Marlowe asked, half joking.

"I? *Non.* For why? Zey cannot hit me. Zey seem so slow—all zese boys. I see zem get ready to make ze hit—I see zere arms

stiffen. I watch zere blow coming. Zen I get out of ze way. Afraid? For wat?"

MR. MARLOWE brought his man back to New York and asked for a fight with Sleeper Siggers. Billy Edwards was shown reports in pink sheets. If he had seen them before, he gave no sign.

"I want to play fair with you, Billy," Mr. Marlowe assured, earnestly. "Pierre can lick your slow old Sleeper so bad he won't know what hit him. And I don't want to take your money away from you. Come around and look him over, give me the fight, and clean up any way you want. But—give us the fight."

"Go get a reputation," was Edwards' answer. "I don't believe a word of it."

And for a week that was all Marlowe could get out of Billy Edwards. He couldn't get anything more out of him because Billy Edwards was, as far as in his power lay, a sure-thing man. He didn't bet money on fighters unless he was pretty sure he was going to get the money back again. While he had the utmost contempt for "book fighters" he took no chances. And he wasn't letting old Sleeper Siggers take any chances either.

"This set-up I've fixed for you, Sleeper," he began to his first string boy at his gymnasium. "All I hear is that he's quick as a flash but is cream puff."

"Boss, you know me. When did I ever care how hard they punched?" Sleeper spoke disgustedly. An ear, which had been hammered until it was all out of shape; a broad, flat, fighter's nose; a skin tough as leather, all spoke of the fighting man who can take punishment.

"Now don't go fooling yourself, my lad!" Billy Edwards had seen rocky pitchers broken at unknown wells before. "There has never been any of them so good they can't be knocked out! You have a face like a rock and no nerves at all, but you can be punched out, if you give the other fellow time enough."

"Maybe so, Boss—it ain't happened very often yet! And what will I be doing to him while he is putting me away? I can kick some with both mits!"

"If you can hit him!"

"Now, Boss!" Sleeper grinned good-naturedly. "I don't care how good they are, they can all be hit sometimes, can't they? You ain't trying to tell me this boy is so fast I can't land on him?"

"I suppose you can hit him. But can you hit him where it will hurt?"

"Any special spot hurt him more'n any other?" asked Sleeper.

"I don't know. All I know is he came out of a book. He's a book fighter!"

"Book fighter?" Sleeper wrinkled his flat nose.

"Yes, book fighter. Marlowe got him out of a book, taught him out of a book; all he knows of fighting is in a book! Some sort of an 'ology book!"

"Boss, are you kiddin' me, or throwin' me a swell party?"

"I'm fixing a swell party for you, my lad. But I want to find out where the book fighter is tender. I don't want to bet a big wad and lose it for lack of a little knowledge. Therefore—" and Billy Edwards took Sleeper off into a corner and talked to him earnestly.

"I ain't never done it, but if it's going to make you happy—sure, Boss, I don't care," Sleeper nodded. "You tell me where and when; I'll find out for us."

"Book fighter!" Edwards repeated to himself, after Sleeper went back to his bag punching. "Book fighter! This Marlowe chap is sure some boob! All the time I wasted on him, putting him next, too! Well, it is fixed soft for Billy. And—now that's an idea—book fighter."

Billy Edwards chuckled. Like many a man with only an objective consciousness, he had a keen sense of humor, but it had to be humor which landed with a thud. Edwards could see the fun in a fat man sliding across the sidewalk on a banana peeling, or two comedians whaling each other with slapsticks. He loved circus clowns, and had been known to pitch pennies for half an hour to an organ-grinder's monkey. So it was really an unusual inspiration which took him to a little second-hand bookshop, where a former playmate made a precarious living.

The bookshop, like all such in either fact or fiction, had a composite smell of piled-up years, stale printers' ink, decaying cover glue, much-used air and paper dust. Billy's nose was responsive to odors characteristic of the ring: garlic with rosin, human sweat tinctured with witch-hazel, cheap tobacco smoke and the sort of perfume which is indigenous to Avenue A. But he sniffed

inquiringly as he entered. "Book fighter—I bet he'll never say book again!" he told himself. "Hi—Jake."

Jake was as musty as his shop. Little and bent, a round innocent face, heavy steel spectacles with lenses which made him fish-eyed, Jake shuffled forward.

"What you want?"

"Nice way to say hello to an old playmate! scoffed Billy Edwards. "I want a book."

"What you want with a book?"

"Never mind what I want with it. You haven't got it, anyhow!"

"Maybe so, maybe not. I get it. I get any book in the world for a price."

"Then get me a book without anything in it."

Jake grinned. "Just the kind of a book you can enjoy, Mr. Edwards!" he chuckled. "But help yourself. Most of them haven't anything in them!"

"Naw!" Billy Edwards shifted his cigar and took a spill from his pocket. "Got a light around here, anywhere? I don't mean that kind of a book. I want a book with pages without any printing on them, and on the cover I want you to print 'What I Know About Fighting, *by* N. U. T. Marlowe.' I want it for a joke, y'understand."

Jake didn't care about understanding. If Mr. Edwards wanted to pay five dollars for a book of blank pages with a queer title on the front, that was his business. So the transaction was concluded. And when the dummy with the hand-titled cover was delivered to Billy Edwards he thumbed it through delightedly.

" 'What I Know About Fighting, *by* N. U. T. Marlowe'!" he laughed. "That's rich, that is. Say, that's rich! I'll give it to him after the scrap. I'll hand him a book—he and his book fighter! Sorry I can't remember that 'ology word, but this'll do—trying to beat Sleeper with a book!" Billy Edwards laid the dummy down and delightedly made half a dozen paper spills from the paper in which it had been wrapped. " 'What I Know About Fighting'— Say, that's some wheeze, that is!"

TWO days later Marlowe had an unpleasant surprise. Going to the gymnasium with Ed Barrows, sporting editor of the *Times-Star*, he found Pierre sitting in a chair, fully dressed, and nursing his jaw.

"What's the matter, Pierre? Why aren't you working? Get stripped in a hurry—here's Barrows, of the *Times-Star*, come to see you work out."

"I veree sorree. Las' night, when I go home, a robbaire, he hit me wiz—I sink eet ees a gas pipe. My jaw—eet ees too sore to take ze chance today."

"A robber? You were held up? Where? Who? What did he take off you?"

"*Oui*. Jus' before I go in my house—you know, eet ees veree dark zere. A man, he come up to me. He say 'You got ze match?' While I say yes some one hit me. Zen—I not know anyzing. I am, wat you call, knock out."

"Well, I'll be—what did they get?"

"Nozzings. I have only two dollaires. Zey get nozzings. But—I would like to meet zat man who hit me!" Pierre's eye flashed and his fist doubled.

"Would you know him if you saw him, Pierre?"

"I sink so—I cannot be so sure. His face, eet ees, what you call—funnee!"

THAT evening at the Gloved Hand, Billy Edwards made terms. "You can have the scrap, if you are so hot after it," he stated. "But you've got to come to me, if I waive the reputation. I tell you plainly, Marlowe, I'm going to make money off you. I don't believe in your book fighter nor your doctor test. A fighter has got to have science, and a punch, and grit, and stand the gaff, and no nerves. There's no book can tell you all that—only punching it into 'em teaches 'em—and shows you."

"That's all right, Billy. It's an open game. If I've got to lose, I'd rather lose to you than to any one. But I warn you—we'll make Sleeper look like a dead one."

Edwards laughed.

"Go as far as you like. Put up a side bet of five thousand. I'll make it 70-30 on the gate—win, lose or draw, or 85 to the winner and 15 to the loser. Take your choice. I wouldn't be so good to you only you've been decent about this book fighter you think is a winner. I wouldn't do it even so without your waiter getting a rep, but we want the money—and it looks easy. Will you come to me?"

"I sure will!" cried Mr. Marlowe. "I'll take the 85-15, and I won't fight you on the referee, either."

The two men hitched their chairs together

and Edwards produced a pencil and a piece of paper. He tore it in half carefully, and made a spill hastily, which he tucked in his pocket. He whistled as he wrote down his terms on the other half, which Marlowe signed.

"NOW, Pierre, here is your chance." Mr. Marlowe was calmly excited. "This house is worth twenty thousand dollars to the winner. There's five thousand on a side bet, and I've another five up outside. Clean up, and you can have a bank account better'n if you sold a dozen silver fox skins. Look out for his right and play for his wind—you can't hurt his face with an axe. But when he gives you the opening—and he will, sometime—show him how hard a cream puff can be."

The shirt-sleeved referee made his announcement. The futile challenges of the has-beens and the would-bes were disposed of. There had been three good preliminaries and the crowd had the proper appetite. Also there was a whisper of big money being bet on the French Kid, and Sleeper's fights had always been good ones. The crowd, hereditary heirs to the old Roman gladiatorial spirit, loved to see Sleeper fight because he could take an abnormal amount of punishment and come up smiling. While not a great boxer, he had a right handed "kick" that did deadly execution. And here was an unknown, with no reputation, but who was whispered to be quite a phenomenal boxer, going to furnish the block for Sleeper's chopper.

The fight fan is a curious animal. He talks much about the art of boxing, and he admires a flashy boy who can twist and duck and turn and block and wiggle out of the corners. But he loves the fighters. Jim Corbett at his best was never beloved as was John L. Sullivan; Kid McCoy, who had them all faded for shiftiness on his feet, was never the idol that Fitz became—Fitz who was fighter first and second and third—and then not a boxer for a long time yet! It was a Sleeper crowd, and while all ringsides like to see the under dog come out on top, they love better to see the rugged boy beat the skilful one; they talk science but they yell for fighting!

There was an instant's silence as the two dressing-gowned figures took their places, after the conference with the referee. The ring was cleared, and the crowd had its first sight of Pierre, stripped. He was well, but not abnormally, muscled, but there was not an ounce of flesh over the rippling cords which played beneath his skin. There were ridges across his back which spelled power, to those who knew anatomy. And there was an absence of nervousness in his manner which boded well for the coming scrap.

Then there was a hurried touching of gloves in the center, and Sleeper, sinking his hatchet face and cauliflower ear low on one shoulder, half closed his eyes and slouched about on his right foot, pawing gently with his left. Pierre stood straight up, his left hand fully extended, and his right drawn way back, "wide open."

"Looks like an easy mark to hit," whispered a reporter to Barrows. "I wonder—"

Sleeper inched gently forward into hitting distance. There was a lithe spring and a left lead flashed out. Pierre apparently did not move, but the glove struck over his shoulder and his own countered heavily, but a bit too high, under Sleeper's left arm.

"Say! Did you see that? Some quick action? Well, I guess!"

Sleeper grunted. But he noticed the slight sidewise head jerk which had aborted the lead. Next time his glove apparently crashed full in Pierre's face. And the crowd yelled. But the ringsiders, the wise ones, knew that while his blow had landed, the black head had drawn back enough to take the force out. And they guessed what the crowd didn't know—that the lashing return had made Sleeper's head ring as it had not rung since Tommy Lowenstein had knocked him out ten years before.

These were the only two blows struck during the round. Indeed, from the standpoint of the fans, the first round was tame. Two, three, four exchanges—the rest, a watchful maneuvering.

BUT the preliminary first rounds of most good fights are tame. Experienced fighters do not jump into frenzied action at the sound of the bell, to lead and counter, duck and sidestep, clinch and break from infighting; they feel each other out, gently, sometimes in what appears to be an almost timid manner. Fighting is a business. The "grudge fight," beloved of fans, is almost as much a myth as "the man higher up." And like any other business, it proceeds cautiously, until it knows its

way about. Then it warms up to its work.

Sleeper and Pierre warmed up to theirs. As round by round went by, and it became the second, the third, the fourth, the spectators had more to look at than to cheer about, perhaps, but they had plenty to keep them from being bored. As the long three minutes and the short single one between rounds added themselves together, a certain redness about Sleeper's stomach and sides, and a peculiar puffy look about his lips told the experienced that there was more than cream puff behind those short blows which came so like a streak of light from the brown shoulders. There was no corresponding redness about Pierre, and his face was unmarked.

Sleeper apparently landed plenty of blows. It is almost impossible for the fight fan to see a blow as it is really struck; he must be in exactly the right position to know whether or not a blow lands with the body coming in against it—then it is very apt to hurt—or the body going away from it, in which case it damages only the man who struck it, by taking so much of his precious store of strength and wind. Only when at right angles to a blow is it easy to see whether or not it lands fair on a face or jaw or ear, and not upon some part of a deftly interposed glove. Many a blow that seems calculated to cave in the side of the head on which it apparently lands, has first struck a suddenly uptilted shoulder and glanced harmlessly into the short hair on the top of the skull where it does about as much damage as a good healthy wallop in a pillow fight.

"That's the quickest man I've ever seen," Barrows whispered to Billy Edwards. "He's going to eat your man alive before the evening's finished. I remember Jim Corbett and Kid McCoy at their best, and they had no such speed as this boy."

"Think so? It takes more'n speed to make a fighter—you have to punch it into 'em," was Billy Edwards' reply. "Take you even in hundreds."

"Of course he won't give up—but I wouldn't bet if I were you, Edwards," growled Barrows.

Pierre was quick. The black head moved, shifted, drew back. He watched, carefully, saw a blow coming, took his head out of the way, or dropped a glove flat over his stomach, and sent back a sizzling uppercut, a jabbing counter with his left, or a right cross which landed often enough to make Sleeper grunt. Occasionally Sleeper swung, head down, two handed, into a clinch, struggling hard to get a piston-rod right going against Pierre's stomach. But always there was a gloved hand or an elbow in the way. Not for nothing had Spider Kelly been the best infighter of his day and weight.

THE sixth round ended and the seventh began. It was warmer now. For even careful, cool-headed fighters cannot altogether keep down that spirit of rivalry, that feeling of exultation, that desire to maim and wound and kill, which is begotten by personal combat, even combat under rules. Pierre was now doing half of the leading, and it was leading which kept the crowd in an uproar. Though Sleeper had a first class defense, and few of the leads did much damage, there were no counters to the leads, at least, none which landed. Pierre had a way of making a quick feint and following it with the blow which he feinted, and then crashing his other hand up or down as the case might be, leaving himself, apparently, wide open. But the counters fell short or went wide.

"He's positively snakelike—did you see him wriggle around that blow?" asked Barrows, excited for once in his blasé life. "I tell you, boys, this is some scrap! And look at Sleeper's face!"

"Zat man, he can hit," remarked Pierre after the seventh round.

"Did he hurt you, Pierre?" Marlowe had seen no hard blow land, but he knew that he was only seeing a part of what happened.

"Hurt? *Non!* But I feel ze power; if I let heem hit me, he hurt! He no like it, now, when I punch heem in ze side. Zat hurt him some. And I sink hees nose, it ees sore!"

"Well, Pierre, it's getting along. I don't want you to win on any apparent fluke. But—I am pretty sure it was Sleeper who crept up on you and hit you, that night you thought you were being robbed. Doesn't he—"

"*Sacre* damn! I *sink* he look like somesings I have seen—so it was *he* zat hit me when I not look! Hurry up wiz zat bell and let heem look out—ah!"

The bell rang. There was the customary scuttle to get out of the ring. Chairs were lifted through the ropes, and a belated towel whisked through the air. Sleeper slouched

to the center, his head still down on his shoulder, both eyes half closed. It was his usual fighting position—his sleepy appearance had given him his nickname. But his eyes were closed as much by five-ounce gloves as by intention, and Pierre's face was still unmarked. Marlowe smoked calmly in his corner at the ringside. Edwards hitched his chair nervously.

There was plenty of action now. For Pierre believed he recognized his assailant. Whether he did or not, he thought he did, which was all Marlowe wanted. And that blow had rankled. Pierre Ladeux began to make things exceedingly interesting for Sleeper. But Sleeper was not a rugged fighter for nothing. Many and many a fight had he weathered through, even when his opponents seemed to get strength from somewhere in the middle of the fight and become, temporarily, tigers of men with battle in both hands. So Sleeper clinched and hung on, and tucked his jaw deeper in his shoulder and watched through sleepy half-closed eyes for the opening.

There were plenty of openings. The trouble seemed to be that they didn't last long enough. The lead that left an unprotected heart ended in a wiggle that let the counter flash by into space. Twice Pierre got home a right lead on the jaw—to Sleeper's bewilderment. For wise fighters don't lead with the right hand; to do so one must "set" the body and "telegraph" the blow, and the counter is often disastrous. But those were surely right leads—yet they seemed to come from nowhere, and there was no face there to receive the counter. But the fans saw where the leads came from. Each brought a howl of joy, and a grunt almost as of disappointment when Sleeper's counter passed under an arm or was deflected from a dainty glove.

The round ended in the midst of a clinch.

"What's the matter?" asked Edwards as Sleeper slouched to his corner.

"I don't know—nothing. Who told you he was a cream puff artist, Boss?"

"Why don't you hit him? There is a heap of money on this, Sleeper—"

"I am hittin' him—"

"You are not! You are hitting his gloves or where he ain't! Hit him on the jaw! You know he's got a glass jaw—put him out!"

"Boss, he's got a glass jaw, maybe so. But he ain't kept it sticking out where I can reach it yet—watch me this round and—"

The bell rang. Again Pierre fairly leaped from his corner. But there was a difference; all the fans could see that there was a difference. The Frenchman was all over Sleeper. He plastered him with rights and lefts; he uppercut and he countered, he led with one hand, with the other, apparently with both hands at once. He ducked right, he ducked left, he swayed dizzily on his feet. But any one could see that there wasn't any force to the blows; that Sleeper was not being hurt. And they could see that Pierre was saying things to Sleeper, though what they could only guess. But Sleeper knew, and soon the fans knew; Pierre was deliberately "making a monkey" of the older fighter; showing him up, demonstrating that he was old and slow.

"You take a punch in ze street—you fight behind ze back!" Pierre cried at him. "Stan' up and fight like ze man—zis way!" And, slap! Into Sleeper's face a softly stinging but not damaging right. "For why you not fight? See— You have not made ze real hit yet—make eet. I give you ze chance—see!"

Sleeper saw, and the fans saw. Pierre dropped his hands and stood in front of Sleeper, laughing. "Come on—hit!" he cried. Sleeper sprang forward with a lashing left lead followed by his right—a rush blow, killing if it lands, and deadly in the opening it leaves if it doesn't. Either blow might have gone through Pierre had it landed. But Pierre was not there. To the fans he side-stepped. To Sleeper he seemed to vanish. From somewhere came something that felt to Sleeper like a piece of gas pipe and that landed with a resounding "Blop" heard even above the noise.

A look of intense surprise crossed Sleeper's face. His hands fell, slowly. He turned, staggered once, then, like a log, went prostrate. And there was no response to the tenth wave of the referee's white-sleeved arm in the air.

"WE LOST, and we aren't squealing." Mr. Edwards was rather pale, but he had always been a good sport. "But you'll have to admit we lost on a fluke knockout. We'd have had you in a minute."

"Think so?" Mr. Marlowe tilted his cigar. "In all his training no one managed to

mark Pierre. It's a shame to take the money, Edwards, but I warned you. It wasn't any fluke. It was a certainty. Betting on a certainty is the only way to win in this game."

"I'm not squealing," Edwards repeated, "but I don't get that certainty thing. I had the certainty—only it didn't come off!"

"How come?"

Billy Edwards chewed on a spill. "Remember the time your man said he was held up? Well, that was Sleeper. I wanted to know what kind of a jaw your man had, before I gave you the fight. So I got Sleeper to hit him one with a five-ounce glove. I understand he thought it was a gas pipe. So we knew he was only four-fifths of a fighter."

"Talk United States, can't you?"

"He had the skill," Edwards counted on his fingers. "*And* the nerve. *And* he's a two-fisted fighter with a reasonable punch. *And* he was well trained. But—he has a glass jaw. And by all I know of fighting, this was our fight!"

"Friend Billy," observed Marlowe, "you are just as smart as I thought you were, but no smarter. I knew Pierre had a glass jaw, too. I never believed in that holdup. I was pretty sure you had him socked one, just to find out. But what I knew and you didn't was that the kind of a jaw doesn't always matter. There are fights where it doesn't make the slightest bit of difference, and this was one of them!"

"I don't get that!" objected Billy Edwards. "Why didn't it make any difference about your man's jaw?"

"Because of what the book, the psychology expert, the chronograph told me! A glass jaw is no good to the other fighter if he can't hit it! Now, sometime when you've got a fighter with a reputation, come around and maybe we'll give you a scrap; of course with eighty-five and fifteen of the gate!"

Billy Edwards gathered up his wits and his overcoat and went wearily home. He spent some time making spills with which to light his pipe. The material of which they were made was a blank book with the title "What I Know About Fighting."

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MEN *like* BEASTS

A Novelette Concerning an Airship Wrecked in a South American Jungle

By

EUGENE P. LYLE, JR.

THE crippled airship grounded in the low brush fringe of an equatorial forest. Only in time they had managed the forced landing, since the forest stretched endlessly before them into the south, thickening almost at once to the matted growth of an impenetrable jungle. A little more and the slowly falling dirigible would have been caught like a tattered rag in the high upper branches of the dense wood. Those aboard could have descended to earth only into a poisonous welter of vegetation, and in that dark and fetid region must soon have perished.

But fortunately, or fortunately at least for the moment, they had landed on the edge of the jungle; in the shallows, so to speak, of bushes and scrubby saplings. Behind them endlessly into the north stretched a rolling grassy llano. On the left a horizon blue-rimmed with haze meant mountains, and to the right it was the same, only off there the sierra was either higher or nearer. The aerial castaways had come to earth somewhere among the upper reaches of the Amazon, somewhere in Brazil or British Guiana, somewhere, as the feeling queerly grew on them, where no man had ever set foot before. They were, in all probability, the first; and, thus far, were spared.

The airship lay in the brush as in a greenish, trashy surf, and was not unlike a vessel of the sea stranded in the shoals upon an unknown tropical coast. With that recourse to jocularity with which man, and especially the American, would slack off a moment of stress, a passenger who was addicted to bright conceits—there is always such a one—perked up and exclaimed.

"Reg'lar old fashioned shipwreck, what? Creepy place. Cannibals, maybe, peeking out at us. Anything might jump out. Reg'lar—"

"Hush—oh, oh!" half shrieked a little blond matron, a Mrs. Mooch.

"Aye, haul your wind!" the captain ordered curtly.

With the exception of one man, these passengers were an ultra-mundane and fluffy lot to be set down into a primeval state of nature. Soft, pulpy organisms they were, and the jungle was a monster waiting. Hectic seekers of thrills, they were making a little side trip. Happening to find themselves in the Canal Zone, they had thought they might as well drop on down to Rio de Janiero in one of the two blimps—

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advertised as palatial airships—doing this little shuttle trick out of Balboa. There were nineteen of them, ten men and nine women, mostly just chance acquaintances thrown together in the intimacy, whether desired or enforced, of the airship.

However, eight of the women would have been quite as well satisfied if the ninth, demurely traveling alone, had continued to grace her usual hunting grounds at either Newport or Coronado. And yet, strangely or not, the men were well satisfied that Miss Vandeleur, so born and to such maiden estate restored by court decree, made her hunting grounds here and now. The lovely minx—now take it from me, no man is going to write ill-naturedly of her—the ravishingly lovely minx had ruddy golden hair and violet eyes. And the hair was so. But the eyes—well, you couldn't always tell, brother. There was a light that lied—lay—in them.

"The lies that light in lilac eyes," the nitwit of bright conceits said of them, with soulful languishing in his own protruberant ones. Whereat Miss Vandeleur gave him a cool, brief look, and retorted, "Stuff!"

Also her warm vivid lips, with a dimple for accessory, behaved scarcely better than the violet misdemeanors. Their habit was a slow, lingering, enigmatic smile, and the smile might be either pensive maidenly innocence or the very devil, while the eyes, collaborating, narrowing dreamily, were lazy imps of slumbering mischief. As Luella Mooch admitted to another lady in so many words, the woman really did have the bloom and figure of a girl, and, my stars, she sure did know how to wear her clothes! No wonder the imbeciles raved, Lamb included!

Lamb was Lambert Mooch, who was Luella's husband.

ACCORDINGLY Miss Vandeleur had been having a nice time all the way down from Balboa, guilelessly tolling other women's men after her as she liked. Excepting one man, she had the men mad about her and at each other, even the captain and the mate, even the two Stipples, father and son.

"I declare, my dear!" Mrs. Mooch said to her with arch raillery, although the young matron was a bit fluttery about the lips and a bit steely about the eyes. "I believe you would gloat—" Luella brought out the "gloat" almost with a snarl—"if

these men with nothing else to think about got to fighting over you."

Miss Vandeleur accepted the compliment with a smile; not the enigmatic one—a sisterly one. Dear Luella so much did want to scratch, and Miss Vandeleur knew she did.

"I think," Miss Vandeleur murmured, "it would be gorgeous."

But even Miss Vandeleur had to admit to herself that there was a dead one. In private pique she wondered if the poor goop's blood was dishwater or sheep dip. Certainly none of it had quickened on Miss Vandeleur's account, and yet the man was not blind, nor yet senile. He troubled her pride a little, for her custom was a unanimous score. She fretted more over this sheep that was not lost than over all those that were. Still, he wasn't much. Nothing to look at a second time, she assured herself. Miss Vandeleur's contempt was abysmal.

He was the exception among the men. Joshua Holcomb was his name, which is somehow an old man's name that yet fitted him in his thirties in an easy comfortable way like his clothes, or like he was himself. You would have been in two minds as to whether Mr. Holcomb was a lean, dry, homely scientist of a philosophical turn, or a lean, dry, homely philosopher of a scientific turn. But he was a bird seed merchant. Nearly every bird in captivity was an enthusiastic consumer of his product. He was going to Brazil on business. He was going to putter around watching the ornithology of South America. Strictly business! Weren't they possible future customers?

Not old, not married, not poor, and susceptible to gay plumage and song, yet this Joshua Holcomb did not react to Miss Vandeleur's bright allure or to anything that was Miss Vandeleur's. Joshua simply wasn't there. He had passed away. Once, the second day out of Balboa, with a jazz record on the phonograph, Miss Vandeleur was demonstrating an ethereal dance step, and in the breezes athwart the airship's deck her downy skirts whirled and floated with her airy pirouetting.

"Shapely little witch, eh?" young Stipple ejaculated, clapping Holcomb on the shoulder.

Holcomb, who was reading Darwin's "Journey Around the World," looked up absently.

"Huh?" he said. "Huh? Oh, yes her, garters are no mystery."

Miss Vandeleur missed a step, for the dead one hadn't whispered it. She shot him a glance of puzzled uncertainty, then tilted a saucy nose and went on with the dance.

Such were the precious little human group, with their niceties and nastities of a finely strained civilization, thus abruptly set down in a brute primeval world where life battened on life. A splintered rib of their gas bag had slashed the silken envelope, and all the hydrogen of that compartment had whistled forth. So there was no going up again; the margin of buoyancy to lift them was again a part of the planet's atmosphere. The keelway had settled heavily in the brush. The jolt had snapped wire stays and braces, bent pipes and shafts, jammed the engines into a mass of wreckage, and smashed the radio apparatus. Days must elapse before repairs could be made and a call for help sent out. Nevertheless, now that the spill was safely over, there was a disposition to regard it as a lark. Not at once could they recognize that they had fallen through the artificial scheme of things and hit uncushioned rock bottom. The captain administered a first shock.

"You people who want to eat will have to get busy. Got to have fire-wood. You men—" he growled pointedly at those around Miss Vandeleur, including the mate —"go to it."

An idea, that, old chap! Passengers were paying guests, rather. What was the crew for anyway?

The captain retorted that he had a foundered airship on his hands, and he wasn't turning his crew into chore boys and gentlemen's valets. The mate would issue axes from the emergency kit. Some could gather wood, and others clear a space in the brush for a fire.

"Mr. Briggs," he said to the mate, "busy now!"

The mate scowled, but complied, with a parting glance at Miss Vandeleur. Grudgingly the lady's other squires also complied. They sensed the need of a drastic government here, but embers of mutiny glowed when they heard the captain's short laugh behind them and saw him settle himself among the cushions of a reed divan beside Miss Vandeleur. And Miss Vandeleur laughed too, low and cozily.

THE clearing was made fifty yards distant, so that no sparks might reach the gas bag, which was only partially deflated. Here the chef cooked supper over live coals, and they ate it seated round the fire, half reclining on mattresses, blankets and rugs brought from their staterooms, like guests at a Roman feast. Here, too, the men could smoke, and the women.

The crew went back to their quarters on the blimp, and soon were asleep. But officers and passengers would not leave the fire. Dusk was brief. The bleak gray expanse of the plain darkened. The form of the blimp lay like a great dead whale upon it. Under the Southern Cross the forest was a wall. It seemed to be nearer. It towered over them. Anxiously they fed the fire, and though the flames drew myriads of flying insects, still the castaways would not retire to their berths in the dark keelway of the blimp. They clung to the light like fearful children, or like the little human folks of the childhood of the race, huddled from bone-crunching monsters out there.

Now that the sun had gone down, the jungle breathed upon them. It was the exhalation of growing things and the effluvium of decay. It was the hideous and unceasing freedom of life on death, of life feeding on life. Life was a glutton, feeding on itself. In the blurred noises of the night they seemed to hear the champing of jaws. The world they had mastered, or impudently thought they had mastered, was rising about them, to absorb them as it would the juices of an insect. They heaped the brush higher on the fire. The crackling sticks were desiccated sunlight. The lords and ladies of creation heaped them on until they should have the Sun himself again.

But at last the brush pile was gone. The last handful of twigs had been laid on, and the glare of the blaze began to diminish, dropping lower and lower. There was something ominous about the diminishing. It was like the ebbing of light in a tomb. Some of the women began to whimper.

"Warned you there wasn't enough," the captain said to the mate, "but you had to hurry in to mix a Bronx for Miss Vandeleur. Now take the axes and a flashlight. You men get more wood here pronto— Eh, what—who—"

There was a trampling and a snapping of branches. Then a man, whom they saw to be Joshua Holcomb, broke into the waning circle of light. He had slipped away, unnoticed, as naturally as one makes a trip to the wood-box. His arms were heaped with dry brush, but he looked haggard. The prosaic, quizzical eyes were distended. There was nothing of his usual whimsical humor about the large, homely mouth as he said:

"Better let them take your pistol, captain." He stepped to the fire and threw on his armful of brush. "Give me an ax, and I'll go with you."

The captain had been watching him with truculent impatience. "This isn't India or the Congo," he sneered. "This is South America. Nothing big to hurt you. Anybody would think you had seen a killer elephant or a man-eating cat."

Holcomb nodded. He had gotten himself in hand as he looked around at the pale upturned faces of the women. Miss Vandeleur, among pillows and cushions, studied him, the violet eyes half closed.

"But boa constrictors?" protested the wit, though with no thought of wit. "I've heard—"

"Shut up!" Joshua Holcomb turned on him. "No, it wasn't a boa. It was a hippopotamus."

"Owns up himself," snorted the captain. "He's been seeing things."

"Sure," Holcomb agreed. "Let's go."

THEY were setting forth, when the stillness of the night was cleft as lightning splits a cloud. It was a shriek, but not a woman's. It was a man's. It came from the blimp, where only the crew were. The scream of a man is rare, like that of a horse. Both are horrible. Only a last extremity of agony, or of fear can wring such a cry from either of these creatures. Naked terror leaps out upon the soul from ambush, and then a man screams. It is the supreme eloquence of mortal fright, and the jelly of one's marrow quivers to it.

Utter quiet followed, the stillness of blood congealed. Then, here at the camp fire, one of the women screamed. This was purely the tremolo of a taut cord swept by that other wave of sound. And when the woman's scream died out, they heard voices of excited commotion over in the keelway of the blimp.

"Some lubber had a nightmare," said the captain, growing angrier.

"Quick!"

Joshua Holcomb plucked the officer's automatic pistol from its holster and darted into the brush toward the low-lying shape of the blimp. All the men would have followed him, but some were held back by the terrified women.

Holcomb did not continue straight for the blimp, but swerved obliquely toward the back wall of the forest, on a line that would bring him half-way between the forest and the bow of the grounded airship. He had not, however, gone far when a moving shape emerged from behind the shadow of the gas bag into the starlight. At an awkward sidelong lope the thing headed for the cover of the forest. What would be the head and massive shoulders showed above the level of the brush. It stooped as it ran, under some burden, a queer whitish lump.

"A bear!" gasped one of the men behind Holcomb. "A bear going on it's hind legs!"

Then Holcomb fired.

The range was long for a pistol, and the conditions could hardly have been worse. Nevertheless, before he could fire again, the moving excrescence on the surface of the brush vanished beneath it.

"Clean shot, I'll say!" ejaculated Mooch.

But when they reached the spot, there was nothing except the tracks of the beast in the soft mold. These tracks were long and slender, not unlike a bear's. The tracks, however, ceased at this point. From there on they were obliterated as though a bag of earth had been dragged over them.

"He wasn't hit. He only ducked," said Holcomb. "And he dropped what he was carrying, to haul it along behind him."

"Carrying what?" asked Mooch.

The captain caught his breath. "God! Come on!"

They plunged into the forest, where the spot from the flashlight touched grotesque and noisome horror at every move. They could not rid themselves of the feeling that the twisting vines were snakes. These lianas were coiled around the trunks of trees and hung from the branches overhead. Some were as large as a man's body, themselves entwined by lesser ones. Exotic bloom scented heavily the laden air. Vegetation had an animal malignance. The forest lived like a beast.

Giant ferns crushed and broken marked the trail, winding in and out through the matted growth. Except for that, those who pursued must soon have been enmeshed, or bogged in stagnant marsh. Clouds of insects rising from the thickets swarmed about the lens of the light. Bats flew low in the darkness over their heads. The whir of an owl's wings in startled flight stopped them rigid in their tracks for a moment. Once an unearthly roar deep in the forest chilled their blood.

"Oh, that," said Holcomb, remembering something he had read. "That's only the howling monkey; little fellows; no bigger than a tomcat," and they went on.

A disturbed butterfly, large as a dinner plate and gorgeous as the rainbow, went flickering through the beam of light. Glowworms gave forth a tiny brilliance like emeralds. There were fireflies. There was an incessant chirping of small frogs. Holcomb, who led and who was taller than the hunched animal they followed, walked now and again into a spider's web, which clung to his face like a sticky veil. He perceived a humming-bird stuck in one of these webs, and swept it free with his hand. Behind him a man caught the toe of his shoe in interlaced roots, and stumbled to his hands and knees. The torch being flashed around, he jumped up with a cry. A mottled snake, the bushmaster, venomous as the cobra, he had pinioned under one knee. Barely, he missed death. Scorpions long as crayfish, were revealed beneath the leaves they shuffled through. One time, overhead, the disk of light framed the sleek outline of a puma upon a limb. The tawny shape hissed, bounded into the underbrush, and was gone.

"A cinch," young Stipple fervently muttered, "that no man ever promenaded here before!"

THE earth softened under their feet and changed to swamp, and here the impress of the burden the animal had dragged went down into shallow water and was lost. The pursuers stopped. Ahead, or obliquely to the right or left, as far as their needle of light pricked the darkness between the trunks of trees and tangled creeper, there was the sheen of standing water. To pick up the trail beyond, though they did not sink over their heads in the ooze, was a hopeless thought.

"So there goes your bear!" gasped the

nitwit. They were all hard blown, spattered, smeared with sweat.

"Or a gorilla," young Stipple panted excitedly.

The captain gave a snort. "Bears—gorillas—in South America!"

He turned to Joshua Holcomb, who was playing the flashlight about with a profound and troubled preoccupation.

"Mr. Holcomb," spoke the captain, "you saw something tonight, before this. Well, there are no women here now. All men, I hope. What was it you saw?"

Holcomb looked up. "I do not know."

"You don't know! Man, you were as white as your collar. You're a sort of jackleg naturalist, aren't you? Well, what was it?"

"I don't know," Holcomb repeated.

"A native, maybe? One of those Arecuna head-hunters with their damn blow-guns and poison arrows?"

"No," said Holcomb, "it wasn't a man. It was a shaggy brute, hairy all over."

"Then some large monkey? Ape, baboon—"

"No, it was none of the monkeys."

"Went on its hind legs, didn't it? This one we've been tracking did. How do you know it wasn't a monkey?"

Holcomb shifted uneasily, but he answered the question.

"Because," he said, "I saw it lighting a fire, rubbing bamboo sticks together."

"Lighting a fire? What did I tell you? An Arecuna! Their damn blow-guns! Arrows tipped with curare! We've got to—"

"Listen to me," Holcomb interrupted. "You're asking for it. Well, all right. Now listen." He stiffened, braced himself. "I was out gathering sticks, as you know. And about a hundred yards away I came to the edge of a shallow ravine. I was wondering if there was running water, for we will be needing water, when a flicker of light, a tiny blaze, caught my eye. It was across the ravine, against the dark background of the opposite bank. Then the leaves, or whatever the tinder was, blazed higher, and lighted up the interior of a cave in the bank, and I saw—I saw an animal squatted on its haunches as it snatched the two sticks—they must have been bamboo—out of the flame. And there was another of the animals—deeper in the cave; the female, probably."

"Arecunas!" repeated the captain.

"No," said Holcomb patiently. "They were great, thick, enormous creatures, at that distance like gorillas. There came a whiff of breeze, and they must have smelled me, for they both jumped up and stamped out the fire, and that was when I came back."

"I bet you!" muttered young Stipple.

A wave of stupidity passed over them. In this region of evil enchantment their world of facts was dissolving. The captain recovered first.

"Pretty rank, Holcomb, pretty rank!" he said unsteadily.

Holcomb was still playing the spot of light restlessly about, and now it came to rest on a snag, a root end, thrust up out of the mud almost at his feet and reaching like a twisted claw over the swathe of the thing that had been dragged. On the point of this snag was caught a shred of white cotton cloth. They stared at that bit of rag.

"Here—the light!" cried the captain, and snatching it, he broke into a run back the way they had come.

The others pressed close upon his heels. They were all driven by the same unbroken thought. Following their own tracks out of the jungle they crossed the brush to the dirigible and crowded aft through the dark keelway to the crew's quarters.

The crew were in their bunks, settling themselves for sleep again. Some were already snoring. The captain flashed his light among them, from bunk to bunk. Grins and sheepish looks met his questioning scowl.

"That yell?" a man answered. "Huh, that was only just Shorty Regan having one of his screechers—a bad dream, sir."

Nor did Shorty deny it. He had 'em, and he felt that he had been caught with the goods.

"All of you here?" asked the captain.

"Why, yes, sir. Of course."

But the captain was not satisfied. He went on. The spot of light traveled from bunk to bunk, framing a tousled boyish head in each, until it came to the last, which was next the open door at the stern of the vessel. And that bunk was empty. There was only the impression made by a body not there.

"For God's sake, who slept here?"

"Haroldson, the rigger, sir. Ain't he there? Now whadda you know—"

The captain called out. "Haroldson!

Haroldson!" But there was no answer.

So it hadn't been one of Shorty Regan's screechers. It was Haroldson who had screamed—Haroldson, whose bunk was empty.

MORNING dawned at last. Paying guests worked like sailors, since work meant defense. Women waived exemptions of sex, and clamored for axes or saws. But for Miss Vandelour the general panic was disloyalty to her beauty and charm. The princess perceived herself eclipsed. A wise, scornful little smile hovered at the corners of her mouth. Oh, they'd be back, like flies to honey!

Brush and saplings had to be cleared from around the stranded dirigible, so that another of the creatures could not approach without being seen and beaten off. And to see by night, there must be light. Fortunately the blimp lay north and south. Lying east and west, it would have cast no shade, or very little, under the equatorial sun. In the morning they worked on one side, in the afternoon on the other. They worked by short shifts, like stokers in a ship's hold. The torrid heat was not all. Hosts of little black flies tortured them. Where this fly bit, a minute globule of blood welled up. Viper-like serpents abounded in the brush, and the toilers watched every step.

In the keelway the mechanical force sweltered over an engine and a dynamo. "Juice by nightfall" was their slogan. They got it. Electric bulbs were strung twenty feet apart around the airship which threw a glare over the cleared stubby strip that surrounded the besieged ones like a feudal moat. The camp fire was well enough by day but nobody wanted more of it by night. They kept close within the keelway, and guards were set, with axes, iron bars and short lengths of pipe. As for firearms, there was only the captain's pistol.

Denuded of the paraphernalia of mastery they were cast back to the plight of their first ancestors. They confronted the same problem of survival, but without the same toughened hardihood, the nature-craft, the tried cunning. It was the same fight, but not on the same terms. An added element in their situation was the unknown. What grisly ferocity out of the night of the past was stalking them? An intelligence, something more than merely brute yet unspeakably bestial, crouched and waited. There was challenge to man's overlordship in it.

During the afternoon the captain with his pistol, four men with buckets, and Joshua Holcomb for guide, set out towards a growth of saplings that fringed the ravine of Holcomb's strange experience the night before. Here they found water, a leisurely trickle flowing into the jungle on its way to the Amazon, and-half way up the opposite bank they found also Joshua's cave, but deserted, abandoned. It was a kennel reeking with stench. It had been clawed out of the soft reddish earth, and the walls were rudely plastered with puddled mud, which the sun's rays striking in had partly baked, and the many fires kindled just within the entrance had dried and blackened it. Against the back wall leaves and llano grass did for a pallet. Ashes and burnt stick ends marked the spot on the earth floor where the fire was built. Littered about were the remnants of past feasting. There were bones gnawed clean, husks, rinds, and pits of wild fruit, and chewed roots, the latter probably sweet cassava—his Honor's tapioca pudding, as Holcomb said.

"Omnivorous skut!" said the captain, fingering his pistol.

"Likely we'd taste good to him too," Holcomb gravely replied.

The last meal of this household had been left, only partly devoured. Doubtless no animal of the jungle could have driven the two creatures from their den, but when the man-smell came to them on the breeze, they had fled, and it could be imagined that they knew a fear they had never known before. The evidence was indisputable. They had stamped out the fire, which kept even the jaguar away; and they had dropped the very food from their mouths.

HOLCOMB picked up half of a torn carcass, small and long-bodied, a dog-like head still dangling from it. "No, it isn't a dog," he explained. "Belongs to the 'coon family. Its a brown coati. But what interests me—" he examined his find closely where teeth had shredded away the flesh—"it was being eaten raw. His Honor makes himself a fire, but he can't cook. And so long as he lives in a cave his house can't burn down to roast his pig for him. In other words,"

Holcomb went on thoughtfully, somberly, "he has captured the sun, but he does not know what to do with it. He can only play with it, like some demented yokel. Here he's got the promethean spark, and he squats and blinks at it."

"Well, wasn't man in the same fix when he first discovered fire?" the captain demanded.

"Oh course, but this fellow has no incentive to go ahead and weld a civilization out of his fire. Why should he? He's already master around here. No lions, tigers, elephants, mastodons—not an animal he can't manage with his bare hands. Plenty to eat. No frost. No necessity of any kind to drive him to utilize fire, so it's just a plaything, like a looking glass to a monkey. Or he makes a pet of it, a sort of caged deity, perhaps. Possibly man himself would never have advanced if a region like this had been cradle of the race. Everything comes too easy."

They had gotten out of the cave. The captain was reflectively holding his nose. "The swine!" he said. "And you say man was in the same fix when he first discovered fire? How long ago was that?"

"About three hundred thousand years ago."

The captain stopped abruptly, shaken through and through by a new thought.

"Say," he exclaimed in an awed voice. "Why couldn't the brutes be men, only three hundred thousand years late?"

Holcomb did not laugh.

"I've thought of that. But," he added, "I don't want to believe it, and I can't. If I could get a look at one of them—"

The captain shuddered.

"Not for me! God, no!"

"I'm afraid we will, though," said Holcomb. He pointed up and down the ravine. "You can't see them, as a rule, on account of the saplings, but there's other caves, here and there, in both banks. We'll have a chance to show what our three hundred thousand years of head start amounts to. There'll be more visitors I'm thinking."

That night the tourists locked themselves in their flimsy staterooms, and slept from exhaustion. Next morning they breakfasted on soda wafers, marmalade and grapefruit, and their terrors seemed long ago, like the disintegrating fabric of a dream. Miss Vandeleur, a maiden still slumberous, hummed a lullaby under her breath and put on a record. She gazed dreamily nowhere. Her supple form swayed. No fewer than three men flung down napkins to ask her for a dance. Her dimple was a lode star. She smiled the wise little smile.

They had a feeling of having been trapped into an unsophisticated flurry of excitement. Even when they noticed that stout wire was being woven into baskets around the guard lights and they were told that several bulbs had been smashed by stones during the night, they only said "How awful!" In the telling it was so like the mischief of small boys. Neolithic anthropoid beasts bombarding an airship! The thought did not get to them. Anthropoid modernity was too intent on a jungle-jazz to which one danced a wild-beast step.

JOSHUA HOLCOMB stretched his long legs. He used the cleared strip around the dirigible for a promenade, but he kept close to the keelway. He had a presentiment of eyes peering out at him from the bush, of ferocious yet childishly puzzled eyes. He supposed they were everywhere, out there in the brush. Then he stopped, and a prickly sensation went over his skin. He could not be mistaken. A head, the crown low and thick-tufted, had dropped back among the bushes. He fixed the spot, held it unwaveringly in his gaze, and waited. Of one thing he could be sure. These creatures had not man's patience. They had not come that far along. He watched, and after a little he noted a scarcely imperceptible stir in the brush, and suddenly he was looking straight into a pair of eyes over the topmost leaves.

Only the grayish tufted cranium and the eyes were visible. The dome of the skull was as low as the curve of an inverted saucer, the sloping rim resting upon the brows. The eyes, cavernously deep-set and small with an evil, ferret brightness, were as he had imagined—puzzled, child-like, but of a ferocity implacable.

Those eyes Joshua met across perhaps a hundred feet of space, yet across an abyss measurable only by geologic ages. The brutish gaze was unblinking in a steadfast malignance. Holcomb's spine crawled. And it was he, the man, who looked away. He turned half round, and continued his promenade.

"Mustn't startle them," he thought.

"They'll be breaking cover and charging us next."

A massed attack and these dancing fools on the airship would be obliterated in their own gore. But there was no gathering together, no call, no utterance, among the grisly skulkers of the brush. Their curiosity was absolutely unsocial. Holcomb tried to imagine what they thought of the inflated bag floating down to them out of the air, of the creatures in it who like themselves walked on their hind legs and made fires, of the dazzling lights like little suns, of the music, sounds like nothing earthly, and of the gyrating antics of the creatures made mad apparently by the noises. Joshua Holcomb gave it up. But he wondered most why the solitary brutes did not gather together for a concerted rush. His own species—*homo sapiens*, so called—should be paying more attention. The guards set were lax. The captain was dancing with Miss Vandeleur. Darn Miss Vandeleur!

The next instant he forgot Miss Vandeleur. A violent commotion had started in the brush, and he swarmed up a Jacob's ladder hanging from the gas bag. From there he had a confused glimpse over in the brush of two interlocked, struggling forms, and on one he recognized the soiled white of tattered cotton rags. He dropped to the ground and ran into the keelway.

"Your pistol!" he cried, whirling the captain clear of his partner. "Quick, it's Haroldson, trying to get back!"

The fight was over when they reached the spot, and the victor had fled at their coming, but the ragged figure with crushed skull lying in the trampled brush was not Haroldson. It was not a man. It was the beast that had dragged Haroldson's body into the jungle, for it had donned the man's white cotton pajamas, tearing the cloth into ribbons over his great hairy chest and gorilla-like limbs. The clothes had roused a queer longing in its breast, perhaps. Out of the depth of its benighted abyss it had thrust its long shaggy arm. The cave age would find a short cut on the road, and pilfer from man. There was a terrible pathos in it. Revulsion they could not understand, yet a fascination even more inexplicable, held the little human group. They gazed down upon a brutishly flat, chinless face monstrously fashioned on human resemblance, yet not human.

Ultra sophistication made a last stand. "Oh, please, Mr. Holcomb," squealed a charming and delicately bred little creature. She was egg-shell china; one could not fancy the potter's clay in her. "Oh, please, don't tell us that—*that*—is an ancestor!"

"Probably," Holcomb gravely replied, "a cousin."

"Ugh," said Miss Vandeleur, "an unutterably hick cousin, if you ask me."

"Backward, yes, but here he is, and he is here to do business with us—some hundreds of him, in the brush or in the forest."

They shuddered, remembering Haroldson. The elder Stipple, a dapper, fussy giant of a man past fifty, muttered something about being doomed, doomed.

"Oh, I don't know," said Holcomb. "We've probably had this fight before—twenty, thirty thousand years ago—and we whipped him then. We everlastingly exterminated him, or—or at least till now—we thought we had."

"Are you crazy, sir?" thundered Stipple. "What the devil do you mean?"

"I mean," said Holcomb, "the Neanderthal Man, an extinct creature of Northwestern Europe neither man nor ape yet like both, that he and man met and fought it out, each for the supremacy of his breed. And we're here today because man made a boneyard of the Neanderthaler. Yet here we meet the Neanderthaler again, we men. How he came here, I don't know. Perhaps he came from Java, across Bering Strait, then dry land, then on south till he found this soft place, where he mired down in easy sloth and hasn't climbed up a peg since. I wonder, gentlemen—yes, and ladies too—if we are still as good as our cave granddaddies."

"Really, really!" protested the big, soft Stipple with quivering dignity.

Holcomb's homely countenance grew stern. "I can tell you how puny man won before. It was his only chance then. It's our only chance now."

"Oh, please, Mr. Holcomb, tell us."

"Team work, my dears. All of us as one—against *them*."

"Of course!" they exclaimed. But Joshua Holcomb wasn't so sure. He was wondering if there had been any Miss Vandeleurs during the Cave Age, going around with criminal loveliness, busting up the team. And if so, what had happened to them? Because, since man had come through, being still here, something must

have happened to them. He wished he had the prescription.

THERE was need. Early that same evening two voices rose in the Mooch stateroom, which meant that the Mooches were wrangling. Then the woman's voice leaped shrilly.

"I don't care, I can't stand it, and I won't, Lamb Mooch!— The way you're neglecting me!— Oh my God, oh my God, if my brothers were here—"

That was when Mooch left, banging the door to behind him. In the saloon he encountered the captain, alone except for a sailor on guard. Mooch knew that the captain must have overheard, and he tried to carry it off.

"Fools, women," he muttered with a grimace.

It was a bid for sex sympathy but he didn't get it. The captain gave a contemptuous snort.

"H'm'f, married man, 'nother woman— you ought to know better!"

Now Mooch had had much to do to keep from spanking his wife. But there was not the same reason why he should not lash out at a man, and he did.

"Why you ——" the captain ejaculated, jumping back and snatching out his pistol.

Black flies, sticky heat, and strain had been bad that day, and at best this captain was an ugly citizen close under the skin. He shot to kill, but the sailor doing guard duty nipped his wrist. An instant later the mate reached him also, and twisted the weapon from his grasp.

"Put him in irons!" shouted the captain, glaring at Mooch. "You're a sweet first officer, Mr. Briggs. Le' go me!"

But the mate had been goaded all day long by petty humiliations and stinging insects. "You find some other lackey to take your dirty orders," he told the captain.

"Eh, what's that?" Members of the crew and half-dressed passengers were crowding into the saloon. "Here, two of you, take that pistol from this pretty-pretty lady-killing navigator—"

The chief engineer intervened. He was a slow, heavy man, and he spoke in deep disgust.

"Hold on a bit, captain. You're not yourself. In the morning—"

"You too, eh? Why, you old grease-swobbing—"

The engineer's temper went by the board.

"Enough!" he boomed from purpled cheeks. "And if you want the truth, you're too mushy yourself, after a pretty woman, for the good of the ship."

The pretty woman in question was the last to appear, but she did not come farther than the excited throng blocking the entrance into the corridor. She could not because Joshua Holcomb intercepted her. She was in negligée, suggesting while seeming to conceal the intimacies of the boudoir. Ruddy golden hair tumbled and cascaded over her shapely neck and shoulders. She was a picture of delicately flushed maidenhood surprised unawares. She had lingered for certain last touches to enhance the bewildering disarray. But Joshua Holcomb would not let her push through into the saloon.

"No," he said. "You get back. They're inflamed enough already."

Her eyes rounded on him in astonishment. Then her low laughter rippled like the purr of a contented kitten. It was like dropping honey. Darn her, did she think he was paying her compliments?

"Hush! Wait!" she whispered.

She held herself to his arm by both hands and drew herself a-tiptoe to see over heads into the saloon.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" the elder Stipple was reproving them in there. "When you bring a lady, even by allusion, into such a discussion as this—dear me, really! And when I inform you that I have every expectation of making the lady my wife—"

"Guv'nor!" cried young Stipple, now but an angry boy.

Mr. Mooch sneered. "Going to beat the big sofa pillow to it, are you?"

"I hope—" stammered the boy.

"You puppy!" and his father slapped him with his big soft hand.

"Old fool, young fool, both flattering themselves," the wit mused aloud.

"Oh," said Mooch, "and you for instance?"

"Mooch," the wit announced, "I've been yearning for some days to paste you a good one. Well, here goes."

Miss Vandeleur danced up and down.

"How perfectly dreadful!" she purred. "I must go see."

Joshua Holcomb caught her. "You'd have them murdering each other next."

She struggled vehemently as he turned her down the corridor, but she did not scream. With one arm he pinioned her arms and her body against him; within the other he clamped her knees together. She was a double armful of catamount, and a double armful of fragrance. He set her down inside her own doorway and took the key from the lock. She stood panting with fury.

"Oh, oh, but you are a dead one!"

"Why so?" he asked. "Oh, yes, because I held you in my arms and—didn't kiss you." He regarded her soberly. "Sets you back a little, doesn't it?"

She slammed the door in his face, and locking her in, he hurried back to the saloon, to din, turmoil, blows, breaking of furniture, vicious yelps, grunts, men fighting, women screaming.

It was a silly business. The spoiled child that skulks in human nature was out, smashing things, having a tantrum. The captain had ordered three riggers to put the chief engineer in irons, but the mechanics would not have that. Let any slob dare touch their chief! The riggers took the dare like a shot, of course. In the saloon and over the side men grappled and slugged and gouged under the electric lights. They tripped into the stubble, rolling, heaving.

Holcomb watched them, appalled. One pair were engaged with passionate concentration near the edge of the narrow clearing. Holcomb shouted an angry warning, but too late. A long, hairy hand from the brush cuffed one combatant over the head, and then the other. The blow seemed light, even playful, but either man dropped like a bag of meal. Another hand, mate to the first, darted forth, and each clutched a man by the collar. In an instant the limp forms of both men were dragged into the brush.

SOMETHING maniacal was in Holcomb's yell. Fists raised to strike stayed poised. Eyes sought his, then followed his transfixed stare, and saw the two bodies disappearing. Men surged to that point, and plunged into the thicket. They beat about, scattering more and more in the dark. Then, out there, rose a scream, a man's scream, as Haroldson had screamed. One of the searchers was missing when they straggled in. They had seen nothing, had found nothing, but they could not forget that scream.

The castaways did no more fighting among themselves that night. They were awed by a fearful chastisement. But morning brought recriminations. For their folly three lives had paid, and somebody must be blamed. But nobody would admit the blame, and little by little, from one word to another, the quarrel began to kindle anew. At this rate the lurking beasts would pick them off one by one.

"Slipping back," Holcomb groaned. "Shame on us, shame on us!"

Gradually he discerned the flaw.

"We're fools, we males of the outfit. And why? Because the women don't help. They don't function. At least one of them doesn't."

Man liked to fight nothing better than another man. And nothing made him quicker to fight another man than some woman, so that the element of swift self-destruction has ever been in every tribe, and in the species itself. The race could not have endured, but woman took a hand. With wiles of soft endearment she smoothed things over, or with virago tongue sent the philanderer packing, and so conserved the warrior sex to make a common front against all that threatened the breed until—until her man straddled the planet.

But since then—well, sighed Holcomb, would you look at Miss Vandeleur, for instance? Demure little traitress to the race! Yet she had sense. Smart as Lucifer she was; had more sense than any of them.

Holcomb sprang up. The brawl was breaking out afresh. He obeyed the French injunction; he sought the woman.

She was still in her room. He remembered that he had locked her in, but feeling for the key, he discovered that it was no longer there. However, he heard her moving about inside, moving busily and brightly about—making her devilish toilet, no doubt. Well, he'd have her out. This mess was up to her. She had to function. He'd tell her!

And then, even as he rapped sharply on the thin door, it flew open, and there she was, and his set and resolute features turned blank with amazement. What kitchen maid or rustic wench was this, gazing up at him with frightened eyes? And where the witch he sought, and her ten thousand devils of mischief? Yet it was the same girl, the same flesh and blood, though, mayhap, a

change of heart. Joshua's senses floundered, while out in the saloon the altercations of the men rose higher, and she cried:

"Let me go to them! Let me go to them!"

"One moment."

He looked her over. She had evidently been rummaging the stewardess's closet. Her dress was coarse blue muslin, the skirt down to the shoe-tops, the sleeves long, the collar closed. No jewelry. No chemistry. Not even rice powder. No enigmatic smile. Never a suggestion of charms concealed. Only a scared white face framed in dishevelment. But Holcomb shook his head.

"You're still too infernal pretty."

"Oh!" she cried in disappointment, and ran to the little mirror over the stationary washbasin. Earnestly she studied the reflection there. "I know!" she exclaimed, and her fingers went to her hair.

He waited in the doorway, watching those fingers. When she turned to him again, the dishevelment was gone. The golden hair was drawn tightly back from brow and temples and twisted into a burnished knob on the back of her head. Not a single loose strand was left for allure. The winsome softness had vanished. Her features stood out in the sharp and unrelieved profile.

"This right?" she demanded, and even the silvery witchery was gone from her voice. "If not," she rasped sarcastically, "then you are indeed hard to please."

She lifted her chin, listening. Out in the saloon they were fast going amuck. There came the captain's voice between gritted teeth. "I'd as lief shoot—"

Miss Vandeleur's tongue gave a little click of exasperation. "Those babies!" she said. "I bet I fix 'em!"

HIGH words rambled off into half utterance when the unexpected termagant thrust her way into the midst of things. Jaws hung slack. What had happened to her? Being men, they could not say. The mystery was absolute. Her features were the same, yet nothing there impelled their gaze to linger. And they feared her tongue before ever she let them have a piece of it. They gaped uneasily at that hard and acidulated face with the vixen's eyes, and slowly an expression of blank sheepishness overspread the countenance of most of them. They were a job lot, for sale cheap. What had possessed them to fight over her? There was no answer. They avoided one another's eyes, flushing poignantly.

And the women? The women snatched an incredulous breath. Nell Vandeleur had lost her mind. Their adversary had disarmed. They could almost love her now.

Miss Vandeleur had not lost her mind. The sanest thing she had ever done in her gay young life she did now. She let the men alone. She spared them her tongue so that they dreaded it the more. Letting them see her was enough—for them. She ignored the men, and turned on the women. The glitter of unholy joy in their eyes she marked against them, but that would be for another time.

"The stewardess wants you all quick," she told these luxurious dawdlers with a rasp in her voice that set teeth on edge. "We can't do it all ourselves, she and I, sweeping, sweeping. The ants—"

"Ants?" demanded the captain.

"Oh, yes—ants. Millions and millions. Whitish ones. Some with wings. They've crossed the clearing. They're like a moving strip of canvas. If they reach the galley, soon there won't be a crust—"

She hit the men there, straight in the bread-basket. The captain charged aft. Every man crowded after him, shoulder to shoulder, brothers in arms, all except Holcomb. Holcomb turned to Miss Vandeleur.

"Good work," he said.

She faced him, cheeks afire. Oh, he could see he had earned her hate! She pointed an imperious finger.

"You go help fight those ants!"

There were ants. Holcomb had not believed it until he saw them. The stewardess was working on them with a broom. Holcomb drew his conclusion with rapt zest. Miss Vandeleur had saved the news of this latest peril to throw at the quarreling men.

The ants came from dome-like mounds scattered everywhere in the grass. A shambling old ant bear had been observed tearing these mounds open with his long curved claws and gathering the ants upon his long, sticky tongue. The army of ants flowed like a thin stream of white sirup. Where the stream flowed over wood, the wood was seared as by an acid bath. In the airship even the furniture would not have lasted long. Already the thin stream had

reached the keelway, and was beginning to spread like a leprous blight over the airship. But the engineers started the one motor in commission; a hose was run from the exhaust, and the innumerable host was flushed out under the scalding spray.

This was too easy. Keyed up to a temper of resistance, the doughty slayers of ants were in the mood for something harder. Let the jungle send forth her deadliest! Meantime the work was resumed on the radio, and all the men were divided into watches, to be rigidly maintained night and day. The little community settled grimly down to a state of siege. They might well be considered as doomed past all hope, but they would not have it so. The old feud between man and the Neanderthaler, fought out when half of Europe lay under the great ice sheet, staged here after thousands of years in an Amazonian jungle! There was wine in the thought. In the vast pattern of creation it was a grim epic vibrating to grandeur. Moreover, out of despair an advantage began to appear. And it was a vital advantage, which had decided the conflict of the species that other time. The beast out there was a lone skulker. Fighting to the death, he had uttered no sound calling for help. He knew no help would come, not even from father or brother. The idea of help was as far from his heart as calculus from his brain. This solitary monster ran with no pack, like dog or wolf or man. He was the hyena of the family.

On the other hand, as by instinct, the precious little human group reverted to the law of the pack, and loyalty to the pack was the first law. Not that there wasn't treachery, foolish and unintended as such, yet pregnant of disaster. Miss Vandeleur observed what was going on and took a hand. It was the second night, toward the dinner hour, after the episode of the ants. By now the wireless was repaired and packing the ether with calls for help, but help might never come in time if—At any rate Miss Vandeleur took the matter in hand. First she discarded the scullery maid trappings and arrayed herself never so bewitchingly, winsomely, daringly. Then, watching her chance to be seen of no man, she glided from her room into the corridor, and then to the room of the Mooches. There, as she knew she would, she found Mrs. Mooch alone, seated before the little mirror with all the utensils of beautification about her.

Mrs. Mooch was still young and fair, with perhaps a touch too much of simper in her technique. She was tense and slight, and just now somewhat spidery in the reckless abandon of fragile silken limbs. Darting a look over her shoulder and beholding the radiant masterpiece of perfected feminity there, the fair partisan at her work bench turned chalky white with dismay.

"Nell! What on earth?" gasped Mrs. Mooch.

MISS VANDELEUR closed the door behind her, and locked it. Had these two been men, the visitor's manner in doing this would have betokened that but one of them was to leave that room alive.

"Darling Luella," Miss Vandeleur murmured, and went over to the divan and sank among the cushions.

Darling Luella recognized the way she did that. It was the way she did it when men were present, so that none of them could keep their eyes from wandering round for another glimpse of Miss Vandeleur's ankles; and fancying men present, Luella knew chagrin, blood-thirst, and leaden despair.

"On your way to dinner?" Luella asked faintly.

Miss Vandeleur's brows arched.

"Why not?" she inquired. "Still it depends on you, dear."

"I—I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Oh yes, you do, Mrs. Mooch." The dulcet tones were gone. Suddenly, it seemed, a rapier had flashed in that room. "You understand quite well indeed. Nevertheless, I will tell you. Wait, though. Don't be the haughty saleslady, for I'm not in the humor to laugh. Don't order me out, either—that is, unless—" the play of rapier became again a sugary purr—"unless you wish me to go in to dinner—as I am."

Mrs. Mooch's shoulder blades, momentarily regal, sagged. "Oh, no, no!" she cried.

"Darling Luella," and the dripping honey was vitriol, "listen. You're not getting away with it. Honest, child, you haven't the—the—I don't know what. Nor the meat, either. Poor dear, you'll have to wait till the styles change. Oh, my land,

and was the tunnin' 'ittle wild woman going to scalp all the naughty bad men-folks—"

But Mrs. Mooch burst into a frenzy of tears.

"I don't care," she wailed, "I don't care! It was my turn, and Lamb had it coming to him."

"All right, dearie. You're welcome. Go to it. Make your Lamb jealous, *if* you can. Only there's one thing, and that's why I'm here. *You have got to stop nagging him!*"

"I declare!" exclaimed Mrs. Mooch. "My own husband!"

"Stop nagging him," Miss Vandeleur repeated succinctly. "Can't you see, you silly doll, that you're doing mischief? We are in hideous danger here, every minute, and your henpecked Lamb, going round sore as a boil, aching to start more trouble, is the weak sister in our defense. Believe me, I know your nasty whine, Luella. After a session with you, no man would be himself, much less the near specimen you picked. He's sullen, ugly. He won't take orders. He won't stay where he's put. Our only chance out of this is watchfulness. Any break, any gap, and one of those monsters slips in, and we are one less to carry on. Oh, for Pete's sake, stop that whimpering and listen to me! Do you know that right now Lamb Mooch ought to be guarding the ship aft, but I'll bet you—I'll bet you he's off pouting somewhere, or else whispering mutiny, telling anybody who'll listen that the captain isn't the man for the emergency. I know, for I've heard him, and—it's got to stop!"

Miss Vandeleur herself stopped. Again her manner changed. She lolled back among the cushions. The wiry tenacity of her character was no more to be suspected in the softly flowing curves of her luxuriously lazy little body. There came a melting light in the eyes, and the slow, dragging smile put the dimple in play. There were covert glances, teasing, mocking, from under long lashes; followed by retreat, pretty confusion. Luella Mooch again recognized Miss Vandeleur's way with men, and fidgeted uneasily.

"So I was thinking," Miss Vandeleur went on, serenely and very sweetly, "that I would go and find poor dear Lamb, and perhaps coax him into a good humor again. Do you think I could, darling? It is *so* important, you know."

Something of the tigress, but of a whipped and cringing tigress, quavered in the other woman's tortured, imploring cry.

"Oh, take them off! Take them off!"

"Take— Oh, I see. You mean these clothes?"

"I'll do anything you say! Anything!"

"You'll stop nagging Mooch?"

"Oh, I will! I will!"

"You'll stop everlastingly hanging pepper plasters on him? After all he's the only man you have, and however can he fight for you? He needs a clear head, such as it is."

"Anything—anything—if you'll only let him alone!"

"Very well. Then I will go and change back to the plain and odious. Fancy all this dolling up for only another woman! No matter, it's the old duds for mine, until —until we're through here, either safe or dead. Such a cozy little chat, hasn't it been?"

UNLOCKING the door, Miss Vandeleur departed into the dimly lighted corridor and turned aft toward her own room. She had just passed the open door of a dark stateroom when she felt herself gathered up from behind and wrapped in two huge arms as in a great furry robe that covered her naked shoulders and arms and cuddled her close to a warm hairy breast as her captor ran with her. The hairs scratched her flesh, and a stifling animal odor filled her nostrils. She closed her eyes. Here was death. Her soul braced to it, so only it would soon be over when that arm, bulging like a gorged python round her, should begin to tighten. She caught her breath.

But the horrible constriction did not come. Instead a low crooning grunt, broken by a sort of cluck, rumbled in her captor's throat close to her ear. It was wheedling, soothing, lush, amorous; and the thing's breath was like flame upon her neck. It was then she screamed.

Hardly more than half of the men were in the keelway at the time. The mate and ten men had gone for water, some to carry the water, the others for a bodyguard. These eleven men were returning through the brush when the rending anguish of that scream swept over them. They dropped their buckets, gripped the bar or three-foot length of pipe that had been issued to each

of them, and plunged pell-mell toward the airship. The foremost gained the edge of the clearing in time to see by the light of the electric bulbs strung around the keelway a brute form leap clumsily from the stern and make off at a queer, bounding lope. The shaggy hulk was fringed by some gauzy fabric, the hem of a woman's skirt, that streamed and fluttered.

Almost at once the humping streak of gray blended with the other shadows of the night, but the screams continued. Always before, so far as they knew, the victim had met instant death. But this time the victim was a woman. A woman—and the beast had not killed her! The pursuing men went raging across the clearing. There was a quality of fury in their hearts that would not have been there were it a jaguar carrying her off, or were she crushed to a pulp already. A supreme indignity to their species lashed them on.

THE beast swerved and headed toward the jungle. This they knew from the cries, thin and piercing in the still night. The pursuers coursed straight toward the changing beacon of sound, and thus hoped to gain, at least a little, on their quarry. The dead blank hopelessness of it all did not occur to them, or only to enrage them the more. There was not a firearm among them. The captain, who owned the only pistol, was on the keelway. But haste was the essence of this business, and they sped on past, giving no heed to the hysterical questions shouted at them.

They crashed into the brush. Soon they were in the timber. The mate and two others, one of them Joshua Holcomb, had flashlights. But there was no trail, no body dragged in the mold, to guide them this time. They plunged to their ankles, their knees, their waists, among the ferns. They tripped on roots and creepers, dodged under festooned lianas, twisted and squirmed through tresses of foliage. With lifted forearm they fended off the bats. These vampires seemed to swoop for the lights or the sheen of their eyes. The woman's cries, only faintly heard now, were off to the right. The marsh that had stopped them before was to the left. They hoped they would come to no such fen this time, but if they did, they would not stop. They did not know who the woman was, but that it was a woman was enough. Then, gradually, they realized that for a minute past they had not heard the faint, muted cry. They stopped and listened, but there were no more cries.

The mate snipped a pocket compass off his key ring.

"We'll keep this same course," he panted. "It will cross the brute's trail, but every man watch sharp for a sign. Come on!"

Single file, they crowded steadily deeper into the trackless jungle. Trackless, at least, it was to them, and not even Holcomb thought of a thing so unlikely as a beaten path. Nevertheless, they came to a beaten path, and met with thus, it was unnatural and uncanny, as though the forest were weirdly haunted. But Holcomb said:

"Animals made it. It leads to their drinking-place, or a salt lick. Trust them to find the easiest way. The beast we're after probably headed direct for this path, and who knows, may have passed here not ten minutes ago."

"Then we'll turn into it too," said the mate, and Holcomb nodded.

"But keep the lights on the trail and look sharp. She will let us know, if she can."

Stooping as in a low tunnel, each with an arm crooked before him to shield his face from boughs snapping back, the file of eleven men rushed swiftly along the narrow, twisting forest aisle.

"Hold on!" The fourth man dug in his heels and stopped. "Gimme the light. Thought I saw something."

The three spots were played about his feet.

"There!"

In the golden circle of the light lay a sky-blue satin slipper with high French heel. Through a plate-glass window upon black velvet you may see such a shoe, or with its mate twinkling beneath petticoats upon a waxen floor, but these men saw it framed in gold in an Amazonian jungle.

"Right!" said the mate. "Right! Come on!"

Holcomb, next behind him, thrust the impossible shoe in his shirt. It may have slipped off the wearer's foot, and she may have been unconscious or crazed or dead at the time. But possibly she had kicked it off purposely, knowing she would never need it again unless they brought it to her.

Farther on, they found a small piece of flowered chiffon. It clung to no thorn or

bough, but lay like a lady's handkerchief upon a bed of mimosa. She must have dropped it, so that she was alive then, this far. Pity gave them eyes to picture her tearing the fabric from her dress and letting it fall over the beast's shoulder into the black void; doing this, but without hope—none, none! that the mute supplication would ever be found. Other shredded pieces and her other shoe she had doubtless cast from her in this ghastly game of "hare and hounds"; if so the probing fingers of light had missed them. They pushed on.

In the black space ahead an outbreak of sound drew the shafts of light to a focus, and then, abruptly as though it were a tragic vision projected by the cinema, they beheld the woman herself running and stumbling toward them. Behind her, like her own shadow distorted and magnified, loped the beast, with one long arm stretched before him, reaching for her.

A miracle was in it, for how else had she contrived to free herself from those arms? What chance, or what ruse of a woman's wits, had worked the miracle?

IT HAD been simple, so simple that only wits quickened to a flash of genius could have been the inspiration. When she could no longer cry out, and that happened when one enfolding arm pressed her face hard against the furry chest, she realized that after all her screams would avail her nothing if the beast were not halted in his flight. That was her greatest need, and became her one thought, like a throbbing ache.

Some of the men would try to follow her, of that she was certain; but they did not know the jungle, and as she recognized the hopelessness of their ever overtaking her captor, she felt herself beginning to swoon. But she caught her lip between her teeth, and the pain cleared her head. How to stop him? What could she do, what could she do?

But the thing was a brute beast; no woman's tongue could trick him. What other weapon then? She hadn't even a hatpin. Nor a lesser pin, that she could get at. Nor would she have used it. The beast would have stopped indeed, but to twist her neck and fling her aside. In no way might she work upon him as she would a man. It was a beast. Well, a beast then! How to stop a beast? What else had she? Then—a flash of genius—she thought of the watch on her wrist.

The watch's ticking should interest him. It was the unknown, and it might do more. Try anyhow, and pray to her neglected Father in Heaven! Her left arm to the elbow was free, which had already enabled her to tear away pieces from her evening gown and sow them along the trail. Reaching up, with her fingers she located the horrid gristle in the stubby hair; then turned her wrist and into the concha of the ear pressed the costly trinket of platinum and diamonds. And in spite of the jolting of his lope, she held it so. She waited for him to grow aware, and acutely aware, of the ticking in his brain. She waited for his clouded child-brute mind to fumble and grope, to take fright. She lived deathless seconds, and with her quailing soul she prayed.

The arms about her tightened, and she believed she was to die. She felt the walls of her body give with the contracting enfoldment. A tremor had shaken the beast's great frame, and that was followed by a taut stiffening. No one may say what vapors of question and doubt formed and swirled in the brute's mind. Peculiarly receptive to unusual alarms it may have been already when creatures so like himself yet so queerly unlike had descended out of the sky, bringing with them some of the stars. And now this insect ticking within his brain, that the soft, limp female of the creatures had thrust there! Did the harried mind with its fumbling rudimentary reason try to explain the new experience by experience of the past, as man would have done? It is possible. Some winged or crawling scourge of his native fens he perhaps remembered as the tick-tick-tick went on, unceasing, inside his very head?

Whatever the cause, the reaction was very slow. Swift in attack or defense the troglodyte might be, as is nearly every predatory animal, but this was thinking, a purblind cerebration, and a sluggish process. There was a faltering, a hesitancy, in the sidelong lope. No doubt the idea of flight and making off with his prize flickered out. It would be but a poor, single-track mind, and that one blurred and devious, broken by many pitfalls. The tick-tick-tick and what it might mean supplanted all the rest of the universe. The Neanderthaler uttered a series of harsh querulous grunts, and came to

a joltering halt. The corded sinews relaxed, and the woman slipped to the ground, at the moment probably not even noticed.

She turned in the dark and ran.

AHEAD, through the mesh of tangled lianas, she caught glimpses of erratic shafts of light. She put a hand to her breast and ran the faster. There seemed to be a trodden path beneath her stockinged feet. She put her arms down, with hands held out a little, so that her fingers brushed along the hedge-like wall of undergrowth on either side. The beast, she supposed, was trying to screw a finger into his ear. But her respite was short. Behind her she heard a quick guttural yelp, and she could not mistake its baffled ferocity. The beast knew himself tricked, and now he was coming.

Suddenly she was blinded as a dazzling light filled her eyes. There were men's voices, and men were hurrying toward her. She doubled both fists against her heaving breasts and raced into the glare. But she seemed to run into a barrier of some sort across her path. It was the Neanderthaler's arm circling her waist from behind. The ground dropped from under her feet as she was gathered into that embrace again. The beast turned with her into the black night of the jungle.

The pack was close at heel. An iron bar, hurled and whirling, sluiced a hairy shoulder. Another belabored the wide, hunched back. One man left the trail, rounded into it again, and blocked the passage. He was cuffed aside. But two more, then three, four, an indeterminate number, replaced him. The hulking cousin was surrounded.

He was shaggy, huge, enraged, emitting staccato grunts of hatred. He was like a grizzly rearing on his hind legs, and the pack impudent little manikin creatures of vulnerable white flesh. By contrast their maddened efforts were an absurd strutting, and their frenzy the yipping of pocket terriers. Once again in cosmic history these pert homunculi confronted the sullen Neanderthaler at bay.

The cornered beast was a lone fighter, which was his advantage with his gorilla strength and the long reach of his arm. Never had he had help. Always he had come on his own, and the habit of it offset the numbers of his adversaries. He let no two of them together come in close, and they could not come at him from behind. Uncouth and seemingly slow, he yet faced round in time, and so maneuvered until he had a large tree at his back. The tree was entwined by an enormous woody creeper, and flanked besides by densely matted tresses hanging from the branches.

With his back to that wall the Neanderthaler faced them. He was a gigantic specimen of furred brawn and great heft of bone even among his own kind, notably larger than the one they had found slain in the bushes. His breadth of chest was thrice that of any man who confronted him, and in his arms he could have taken four or five of them together and crushed out their lives. Formidable though he was, there was, besides, a peculiarity about him indescribably repellent. The hair of his head was a lighter gray than that on his body, and where it fringed the low dome of his skull it hung low over the temples and back of the neck, so that it had a hideously softening effect upon his massive inhuman features and gave the monster an air of benevolence that was unspeakably clammy. And all the while the small, evil eyes deep in their bony sockets darted and shifted from one man to another with a hot and soulless malevolence.

They tried to blind his eyes with the flashlights, but still holding the woman hard against him with one arm he drew her higher until the shadow of her head fell upon his face, after which, by only a slight movement he could evade the glare and yet keep his foes in sight. The body of the woman was as a shield and buckler for him too, though likely this was without conscious intent on his part. Because of her there, crumpled chiffon and tender flesh, they could not strike him as they would, while he used his long free arm as a flail and brushed them off like puppies. He blooded them with his nails. He cuffed them spinning against tree trunks. At last, craftily watching his chance, he plucked an iron bar seemingly out of the air. He wrested it from the man swinging it. All in a second the Stone Age had filched from the Age of Iron.

THE men stood off from the sweep of that uplifted bludgeon. They were only wasting themselves away. Soon they would be too few to continue the fight. Then the beast would launch himself among them and brain them one by one.

They paused uncertain, wearied and panting. They had not quit. They would go back to it, but their stubbornness was dogged, sacrificial. The white heat of conquerors had gone out of them.

One muttered under his wheezing breath; they saw their finish. The moment had come when one among them must rise and be the paladin, and fire them anew so that they should become more than men. Either this miracle of the god-like in man had to be, or they perished as only so many animals.

"We'll chop him down at the roots," Joshua Holcomb called out suddenly. "Listen while I'm telling you."

The common sense of it caught them. None more eagerly than the mate rallied to the leadership of the idea. And at last speech was a factor.

Thus far they had fought only in haphazard cooperation. They had kept up a clamor of shouts and cries, often in warning or terse command, but mostly it was merely the emotional utterance of a scrimmage. Now, though, they seized on the dominate advantage of their breed. They took counsel. They had a plan. That way, they were more of a giant than the Neanderthaler. And to the Neanderthaler, that way, they must have bulked more huge, more monstrous, than he to them.

Holcomb handed the flashlights to two of the men already disabled. "Keep the spots on him. Give us light."

Seven others, each with his iron cudgel, quickly took positions in a semicircle facing the beast. They crouched like runners awaiting the signal.

"All set?" asked Holcomb. He stood between them and the beast, facing the creature and holding his own bar before him like a sword at thrust. "Good—at him then!"

The troglodyte raised his own iron bar over his head for a backhanded sweep as Holcomb rushed at him. The blow would have taken Holcomb's head off his shoulders. The essence of the counter to it was precision; calculated and executed to a split hair's breadth in time. Holcomb lunged with arm extended, and drove the end of his bar over his adversary's left shoulder into a fork of the tree behind him, stopping short the other's terrific downward slash. Not iron, but bone—the beast's wrist—crashed against the obstruction, so that the bludgeon flew out of his hand. It whisked off Holcomb's cap, and Holcomb reeled, clutching blindly, until he dropped.

But the others had charged in, all seven. Each had his cudgel of iron, gripped by both hands and swung like an axe. They were in there, chopping at the beast, before Holcomb fell. They swung low. Almost the first blow crashed against a shin bone, and the troglodyte opened wide his mouth and vented a howl of agony. The men labored in frenzy, taking what befell them from the beast's wildly thrashing arm. Literally they broke his bones from under him. The vast hulk swayed, and there was clearness for a blow at the base of the skull. He tottered then, and slowly went over like a stuffed, top-heavy bear.

They checked his fall and dragged the woman from his relaxing hold.

Half a minute later, or a minute, Holcomb got drunkenly to his feet. This was no time to be put out long. Things were to do. A subconscious urge was prodding him back to consciousness. Streaks of pain zigzagged through his brain. It was a blurred world. Voices, exclamations, were part of the haze, which had color, vivid, changing pastel vapors, formless, floating queerly, and out beyond, velvet black—night or death, same thing.

He pressed his fingers to his eyes and looked again. It grew upon him that the job was done. Done, thank God! And the woman was safe. He heard her, and, in the clearing haze, he saw her. Wasn't she pretty? Some young girl in party clothes. Nearly torn off her, though, like she'd been racing through briers. Golden hair was tumbling over white shoulders. Crimson cheeks, mantle of purity. Wasn't she pretty? He discovered that he was seeing very much better. Holy gazooks, it was Miss Vandeleur! Yes, yes, now he remembered.

She was laughing and crying. She was tenderly crooning. She was flitting from one man to the other. She put her arms around each man's neck and kissed him. "Men, men!" she kept saying. She laughed and cried. She crooned in a transport of thankfulness. "Men, men!" She loved them. The warrior sex, protectors of the species, she loved them. Her ecstasy was akin to worship. She could not extol them enough. The males of the breed were worthy.

These men did not misunderstand, although they but vaguely understood. They were embarrassed, as by the solemnity of some sort of ceremonial, and they patted her awkwardly when she kissed them, and said "There, there," in husky tones.

She came to Joshua Holcomb and put her arms around his neck too, but she did not kiss him. He thought she had fainted, and he held her. She had not fainted, however. She sighed like a tired and overwrought child, and stayed there.

When they returned to the stranded airship, carrying the badly maimed and constantly watching for attack by another of the beasts, they were greeted with the news that the radio calls for help had been answered.

"Time, too," said the captain. "A little longer here, and we'd have to begin living off the jungle."

"Well, we could do it," they answered him.

TWO days later, which by rigorous guard they survived without further mishap, they sat at lunch some thousand feet above the earth, aboard the sister shuttle ship that had picked them up, once more south bound for a little side trip to Rio Janiero.

Miss Vandeleur was as ever the demure witch, or piquant divorcée, as you wish, the charm and lure of her slender person never so potent.

"Oh, but Luella," she had gently informed that vexed and uneasy matron, "the bars are down again, darling."

They were, and matrons were vexed in vain, and uneasy for cause, which was the loveliness that took men's breaths, the mischief in violet eyes, the slow dragging smile.

But Miss Vandeleur wearied of it. With something like dismay, she perceived that the game had gone stale. Poor sport! Puerile, insipid!

After lunch there was dancing, to the plaintive whining sweetness of an Hawaiian record. A half hour of that and Miss Vandeleur stole away. Far aft she came upon the dead one reading Darwin's "Journal of a Voyage Around the World." She journeyed round herself until she found another chair, which she pulled up alongside. She sat down and composed herself with an air that said she was going to be very good indeed and never think of disturbing any one.

Joshua Holcomb was vague about what was in the next paragraph he read, and he read it again. He went on to the next one. Nobody said a word. He read both paragraphs again, which made three times for one and twice for the other. Still vague as turtle soup! He got up and went grumpily away, in dry, silent scorn.

Miss Vandeleur sat quietly and wisely where she was. She continued to sit there. And surely enough, after a while Joshua Holcomb came back.

"I can't stick it out," he growled at her, blaming her. "I love you, worse luck!"

"You do?" she exclaimed, looking up at him. "My, oh, my, but you mustn't get so mad over it."

He scowled forbiddingly.

"You're awful slow finding it out," she observed. "I could have told you days ago, if you'd thought to ask."

"It will be hell," he growled some more, dropping moodily into the vacant chair.

"Oh," she said earnestly, "but I'm going to behave from now on! Didn't you know that? *So* nice and proper!" She sighed in the exaltation of righteousness, but she checked a covert glance which, if permitted, would have been teasing, mocking, from under long lashes, to be followed by retreat, pretty confusion. Claptrap, rubbish—she threw all that out. And when she spoke it was a little prayer, very wistful.

"Make a home for me, you dear old Josh," she said.

—CARTRIDGES

How to Outwit a BAD MAN

By Robert Beckley Harris

"SHERIFF, yo're due to lose the election—" began Cal Blythe, deputy, settling deeper into his chair tipped against the outside of the office.

"I know it," broke in Parsons, seated at the other side of the doorway; "Why rub it in?"

"—Unless yuh can make Texas confess, I was goin' to say," continued Blythe, his dreamy eyes on the distant foothills.

The front legs of the sheriff's chair hit the porch with a bang. His mustache bristled. One hand gripped a bony knee while the other tore the tattered sombrero from his shaggy head and threw it onto the rough boards. His eyes, under heavy brows, glared at the lean deputy. "*Confess!* Texas Jones *confess?* Not in a thousand years! If I wait for him to confess, I'll skate over hell on my hundredth birthday! We gotta catch him red-handed; that's what we gotta do." He relaxed and sighed.

"I know," went on Blythe, "but he's in for thirty days now an' 'lection's right handy. He won't be out in time for yuh to catch him at nuthin' until they have a new sheriff. Then we'll both be outta jobs. The people're howlin' about yore bein' too old for the office an' such like. If we could make him confess to what we just plumb *know* he's been up to, we'd be all set!"

"If we had the ham—we'd have ham an' aigs—*if* we had the *aigs*," replied Parsons acidly, clamping his jaw shut as he thought of what the people were saying.

"Aigzactly," agreed Blythe, his fertile brain busy with a problem. "But all is, we gotta make him confess *now*, while we've got 'im handy. If we don't we'll never get another chance at him!"

"Do yuh think he's goin' to admit he's done all them robberies an' that murder just to please yoreself?" drawled Parsons bitingly, wrenching off a chew of tobacco with already stained teeth.

"Eh? Oh, yeh—he would if we got him mad enough!"

Parsons quietly gazed at his deputy and sighed with exasperation. Believing that Blythe had another of his "fool ideas," the sheriff began a gloomy contemplation of being run out of office after many faithful years.

The peaceful calm of Cactus, in Canyon County, had been rudely shattered. Sheriff Parsons had grown up with the town, crushing lawlessness with an iron hand. The jail, built in the old days, could accommodate twenty men easily. Cobwebs covered most of the bars now. It hurt the

old man's pride to think that a crook should prove to be smarter than he, but such was the case. The weekly stage was held up and robbed twice in succession. The man got away with the booty. Sam Prescott, who sold a claim back in the hills, was shot and the money taken. Parsons fumed in vain. The criminal left no trail.

AS TIME went on and more depredations were discovered around and about—the sheriff apparently doing nothing about it—a political dust-cloud rose and it kept growing. The people wanted results. Parsons was "getting old." He wasn't "fit for office." The murmur of discontent reached the sheriff's ears and he strained himself another notch. He had some mighty good ideas as to who the hold-up man was. But suspicions differ from proof by a wide margin. A gentleman from Texas, who called himself Jones and worked on the K-Bar outfit, had queer habits.

Although Parsons and Blythe worked overtime to hang something definite on him, they failed miserably. A week before, said gentlemen had taken the roulette-wheel in the saloon apart to ascertain what made it go—if anything. He was slightly drunk at the time and made a mess of things. Parsons tucked him away in his capacious calaboose and sat down to think things over. He had his man, he felt sure, but what to do about it? He could only keep him thirty days on the present charge and he had no other that he could prove! Hell of a mess he felt!

He was jolted out of his retrospection by Blythe's drawl. "Yuh gotta letter from the Pan Handle this mornin'. From Sheriff Steele to be aigzact," murmured the other, swinging his boots over the chair-arm and facing Parsons.

"Huh? The hell I—"

"Shut up an' listen. Texas come from down that-a-way. We dunno what he done down there, but *he* does. Lessee. He boasted that no jail could hold him or ever had in case he wanted to get out, when we poked him in here. We gotta get him wantin' to get outta here plumb bad! We gotta get him hatin' me worse'n poison! We gotta give him a chance for a break!"

The sheriff leaped to his feet. "What for cripe's sake yuh talkin' about? Gone crazy? Give him a chance to get out? Get him mad at yuh? *Give him a chance*—get him—" his mustache bristled as he glared at the other. "Thought yuh said that we got to make him confess while we had him in here! Gone plumb batty?"

"Didn't say let him *out*, did I? Said give him a chance to get out! Well, sit down an' listen." For over half an hour, Blythe talked. "Now then," he concluded, "yuh see why I want him transplanted to the cell in the north corner!"

Parsons sat limp in his chair, his long legs straddled out before him. Now and again he would wipe his brow with a huge bandanna and sigh, welcome sighs of immense relief. "By gum! If yuh get away with that, I'll keep yuh as deputy as long as I'm in office an' help yuh get in when I'm thru!" He reached out a sun-tanned paw which Blythe shook solemnly.

RISING together, they went inside. From a box in one corner of the office, Parsons took a pair of leg-irons. A chain that would have held a horse connected them. With these under his arm, he unlocked the door to the calaboose and stalked down the aisle between the cells, Blythe following close behind.

The lean Texan heard them coming. He sat up on the cot. The grim look that lay about their lips made his eyes narrow. The clanking of the irons made him shiver. He had always loathed them.

"I wonder what Steele's got up his sleeve," muttered Blythe, as Parsons unlocked the door.

"Dunno. But we can't take chances," replied the latter as the door swung shut behind them and they faced the scowling prisoner. He took the irons in his hand and advanced. Blythe kept the man covered.

"What's them for?" snarled the man. "Ain't this damn cell small enough as it is?"

"Shut up," snapped Parsons. "Hold them feet still, yuh scum," he growled as the Texas shifted his feet, making a move as if to resent the officer's actions. The man glared at the unwavering six-gun that Blythe held and subsided. There was a look about the deputy's eyes that he didn't like!

"When do you reckon he'll hang?" questioned Blythe, as Parsons hauled the other to his feet and snapped handcuffs on him.

"Don't know just yet. Have to wait

until Steel gets the dope together. Move along there."

The Texan glanced from one to the other. A puzzled expression, mingled with fear and doubt, filtered across his face. The narrow, shifty eyes smoldered and glared.

"But—"

"No buts. Git!"

In silence, the three marched down the long aisle to the cell in the north corner. This was the most remote and the strongest of them all. "I reckon I'll remove the bracelets, but the leg-irons stay put," remarked Parsons crisply, inserting a key in the lock. Thus they left Jones and retired to the office.

"WE GOT him thinkin'," chortled Blythe, as they sat down on either side of the table and rolled cigarets.

"Uh-huh," agreed Parsons. "I reckon though, it's just as well the people don't know he's the man we believe's the murderer of Prescott—they liked Sam plumb well!"

"Think they'd start a necktie party?" murmured Blythe absently, watching the changing colors of the sunset through the little window.

"Dunno. But what they don't know won't hurt 'em!"

They talked in low tones until the shadows began to gather without and then Blythe lit the lamp. "Reckon I'll feed the cub," he muttered, opening the closet.

Presently, with a lantern hung from one hand and the Texan's supper in the other, he wended his way down the long aisle of dusty cells. The prisoner's face gleamed white as Blythe set the light down and advanced, keeping the glare of the lantern behind him.

"Reckon yuh eat thru the bars t'night," he drawled in a hard voice. "I don't aim to take chances with rattlers nohow!"

The Texan's face paled and the hands that gripped the bars showed white across the knuckles. His eyes grew narrow and they shot darts of flame toward the other. Slowly, he ate the food from the platter that the deputy held up to him, saying not a word. Strange thoughts were growing in his brain.

"I tell yuh that I'm one smart deputy," began Blythe. "I'm the one that connected yuh with Steele's letter. If more sheriffs had my brains, they'd be less crooks. After I get yore hash settled, I'm goin' after the gent that's been holdin' up the stage, etc. Just between you an' me, Bo, I ain't so easy as people think. I've been preparin' a trap for that gent an' when I get ready, I'll spring it. Parsons don't 'mount to much nohow."

He paused and glanced at the other. An expression of amused contempt was on the Texan's face and his thin lips twitched as he munched the bread.

"Give 'em rope enough an' they'll hang themselves, is my motto," he went on. "Take yore case, for instance. Yuh thought that yuh could come up here an' live down yore past life. But one little slip gave yuh away to me an' now Sheriff Steele's plumb busy. I tell yuh that a smart sheriff is bad medicine for a crook. Yuh can thank me when yuh stretch hemp. I'm the one that's runnin' this game just like I'm goin' to run that other crook into hell when I get ready. Yuh guys are all fools anyhow! I never seen one yet that had any brains. If yuh hadn't been such a dodderhead down in Texas, yuh wouldn't be wearin' irons now!"

Grim and silent, the Texan glared through the bars. A great and growing hatred was burning for this loud-mouthed deputy. He said not a word as Blythe took the light and went away.

THUS for two weeks, the deputy taunted and jeered at Jones. All the words that his sardonic nature could command, kept the Texan constantly squirming. Nothing was left unsaid that might get beneath the other's skin. As the days passed, Blythe's contempt for the prisoner increased and he no more fed him through the bars, but went inside, leaving the door unlocked.

The Texan was waiting his chance. In silence, he bore the other's jeers. Only his eyes leaped and danced like coals on an open hearth. His thin lips twitched at times and his hands trembled slightly.

Mysterious letters came and went. The fate of Jones was kept constantly before his eyes by the active mind and imagination of Blythe. He could paint a man hanging by his neck from the gallows with startling clearness!

And Texas Jones, his mind running back over the years and stopping at the many crimes that no sheriff ever caught him at,

grew desperate for a chance to get away. He realized that he must have slipped. Was that fool deputy as careless as he acted? Before he left the jail, Jones meant to get even with the officer for his weeks of abuse. The man thought himself so smart! Time would tell. He hourly watched for an action that would give him a brief split second to snatch the other's gun.

"Well," greeted Blythe, one morning two weeks later, "I reckon we got the chain of evidence all forged. Better eat hearty my lad. Yuh won't need many more meals! Steele is headed up this way an' when he gets here we'll have a little trial. It won't be much, as trials go. Just think, within a week, just one short week, seven days, yuh'll be dangling from a beam. They say a man kicks an' squirms somethin' awful when the rope cuts into his gullet! I wanta see for myself! Yore one day nearer hell every morning, brother. The devil an' all his imps are waitin' for yuh. Better eat hearty, feller!"

With a muttered curse, the Texan gathered himself for a leap. A gun stared him in the face. Narrowed, contemptuous eyes told him that the owner would pull the trigger if he made a wrong move. He relaxed on the cot while the deputy laughed jeeringly.

"I shouldn't wonder but yuh'd rather be shot 'n hung. I reckon it's a heap quicker. But I'd rather see yuh dangle an' kick. Steele'll like to see yuh, too, I reckon," he laughed and shoved the other's food toward him. "Eat hearty," he admonished!

WITH a shudder of hatred, Jones began on the meal. His eyes centered on the deputy's big gun—shoved into the band of his trousers. He must get that gun! His brain raced the while he ate, rejecting plan after plan. He was desperate. One slip on the part of Blythe and the game was his!

The officer leaned back against the bars and slowly smoked. His taunting eyes and sneering lips leered at the other. He was dead-sure of himself and wanted the Texan to know it. But didn't he notice the gleam in the other's eye? Didn't he give the Texan just due for his capabilities? Was he not aware of the fact that the man hated him worse than anything else on earth?

His breakfast finished, the lean Texan fumbled for a smoke. "I reckon yuh got me dead to right," he muttered, seemingly cowed. "I must've slipped somehow. But that's all right. I walked into the game with my eyes open an' I reckon I'll walk out —a man! Got some 'bacco?"

Blythe hesitated. Should he waste his weed on the prisoner? The other noticed his indecision and a shaft of hate shot from his eyes, to be instantly smothered. "Oh, all right, here yuh are. Yuh won't smoke much more, I reckon," drawled the deputy, tossing the sack across the cell.

The Texan rolled his cigaret and held the sack out to the other. "Toss her back here," snapped Blythe, "I don't aim to get my eyes filled!"

The sack landed at his feet, spilling half the contents. "Damn you," roared the deputy, "come over here an' pick that up!"

Their eyes locked. Finally the Texan lowered his gaze. "All right," he muttered.

Slowly and with seemingly no interest in life, he slouched across the cell. The officer stepped aside. The big gun swung close to the prisoner. With knees bending as if to reclaim the spilled tobacco, the Texan suddenly snatched the big weapon! Like a cat, he leaped away.

His eyes snapped and blazed. His body crouched. The hand that held the gun gripped it so hard that the fingers showed white. His chin quivered with anticipation as he eyed the startled Blythe. The deputy was backed against the door. One hand gripped the edge as if in readiness to open it and leap away. The other was extended before him as if to ward off a blow. His jaw hung loose. His eyes bulged.

He saw death written in the eyes of the man before him. Hounded to a point of insanity, the Texan would wreak swift revenge. Should he make a try for the door? No. Not a chance. The other would shoot before he could move a step. Jones read his thoughts as he stood gloatingly near the cot.

"Damn you," he cried hoarsely, "move one step and I'll fill yuh full of lead! Thought yuh was so smart! Didn't yuh? Crooks are all fools, ain't they? They ain't got no brains! I fooled yuh when I was kneeling for that tobacco, yuh cock-eyed lubber. Yuh monkey-faced buzzard, yore goin' to shove that other crook into hell after yuh get rid of me! Idiot. I'm the gent that held up the stage. I killed Prescott. If yuh was as smart as yuh claimed

yuh was, yuh'd had me hung long ago!"

He wet his lips. Revenge was sweet! Blythe's eyes had glowed strangely as the Texan talked and he seemed staggered by the news. His hands clawed at the bars by his side. His eyes wandered to the top of the cell as if searching for a way to escape. He shot a glance down the aisle as if hoping to see Parsons coming to his rescue.

"Yuh needn't think he'll help yuh out," sneered Jones, noting his glance. "He's went to dinner." He straightened his tense body and sat down on the cot. "Unlock them irons an' don't try to be funny or I'll kill yuh before I'm ready."

Slowly, mechanically, Blythe moved across the cell. He knelt at the other's feet and produced a key. His hands trembled so he couldn't insert it in the tiny hole. He jabbed in vain. Great beads of sweat stood out on his brow, as if his mind was trying mightily to function and couldn't comprehend what had happened.

"Wait a minute an' steady down," advised the Texan sneeringly. "Did yuh think that yuh could use me the way yuh been doin' an get away with it? No. I'm goin' to lock you in yore own irons. I'm goin' to gag yuh. I'm goin' to fix things so that when Parsons opens the door, it'll pull the trigger to this gun, shootin' yuh through the heart. Then, before yuh can tell him what I've told yuh, so yuh can think about it while waitin' for yore death, he'll open the door an'—"

Blythe drew back as if in sudden fear. His face worked. His tongue protruded. He was the picture of terror incarnate. He shook as if with palsy as he staggered to his feet and backed a step away.

"Yuh can remember what yuh said to me while yore settin' here waitin' for a step. Yuh'll try to howl, but yuh can't. Yuh'll watch him take hold of the bars. Yuh'll see the string tighten—the trigger tremble an' then—" He laughed with the idea, his whole figure trembling with mirth.

"Now unlock them irons. I'm tired of fooling around. I gotta move." The gun-muzzle approached the deputy's chest.

"Go—to—hell," drawled Blythe quite distinctly. He snapped erect. The fear was gone from his face. He was almost smiling. "I don't know nuthin' about what happened down in Texas. I never did. I wanted yore confession to these crimes. An' I've got it! There's a dictaphone in this cell. That gun's loaded with blank cartridges!"

Concluding

Selwyn Jepson's

Novel of LOVE *and* CRIME

The Diamond MAKERS

Preceding events briefly retold.

David Shaw Gould was sitting on a bench by Waterloo Bridge, London, starving, fearing arrest for the suspected murder of Reuben Lipsheimer. He had called on the murdered man the evening before to retrieve a £40,000 pearl necklace which his mother had borrowed money on and repaid to Lipsheimer just previous to her death. The Jew had refused to give up the necklace, knowing David's mother was dead and that David had no proof that she had repaid the loan. David left his house after a stormy session, slept in the park and read of his murder the following morning. The police were looking for David as he was the last person known to have been at the Lipsheimer home.

A seedy-looking stranger (Blenkiron) sat down on David's bench, exchanging commonplaces and finally invited him to share with him a smoked haddock. He ended the meal by offering David a job as an assistant to a chemist at Sommerford Keys, giving him money and directions how to reach the Keys on the morrow. David ate a hearty meal, returned to the park from habit. He arrived there just in time to prevent Ann Brunton from jumping into the Thames. She suffered under the delusion that she had killed Lipsheimer as she was there the night of the murder, before David was, and shot at Lipsheimer when he tried to embrace her. He had tripped over something and fallen and Ann fled believing she had killed him. David and Ann spent the night on the park bench, ate breakfast the following morning and parted as each had to go out of town that day for their respective employers.

Shortly after David entered the train for Sommerford Keys Blenkiron stepped into his compartment from the wrong side of the train, calmly announced he had shot a man who was spying on him. Just before the train started Ann entered the compartment and Blenkiron introduced her to David as his secretary. Both were astonished to find their employers one and the same person but did not admit their previous meeting to Blenkiron. During the journey Blenkiron explained that Prof. Massaroon, the man David is to assist, is about to *make* diamonds and hints at possible interference and violence from *the other people.*

On arriving at the Mill House they found Mr. Zack (an old enemy of Blenkiron's) captured by Van Loon, the diamond cutter. Blenkiron ordered Van Loon to strangle Zack the following morning. During the night David freed Zack, taking precautions to make his escape seem due to Van Loon's carelessness. The next morning was spent in preparing the laboratory to *make* diamonds.

After lunch Blenkiron discovered Ann in the study reading a letter he had written and about to type it. He was furious because this letter told of his intended betrayal of his partner, Mr. Fox, by stealing the first batch of diamonds made, and decamping. He seized Ann—took her through a secret passage to a cellar and locked her up.

The professor *made* diamonds that afternoon, all were present except Ann. Blenkiron explained her absence by saying he sent her to the village to mail a letter. David was very uneasy about Ann, and while they were waiting for the crucible containing the diamonds to cool, David started toward the village

hoping to meet Ann. He made inquiries about her at a little inn half-way to the village and there found Mr. Zack. He told David Ann had not passed the inn, told him Blenkiron was probably holding her a prisoner. He gave David a pistol and advised him to use it to force the truth from Blenkiron.

David returned to the laboratory as they were opening the crucible. Blenkiron took the diamonds but immediately handed them to Van Loon for his expert opinion of their worth. Van Loon arranged them on a paper, studied them with a glass and finally pronounced them worthless. After which verdict he made his exit, grunting that "no one can *make* diamonds!" Blenkiron flew into a rage at Massaroon, mauled him about, declaring him a "fake." Between fits of rage Blenkiron noticed Van Loon's absence, then sees that the diamonds are gone too. He dashes to the door. *It is locked.*

CHAPTER VIII

IT TOOK Mr. Blenkiron exactly three and a half seconds to get out of the laboratory assisted by his rage and the length of steel bar which the professor had used earlier in the afternoon to demolish the rays plant. The financier burst the lock and went through the doorway and as he disappeared David saw him draw a pistol from his hip-pocket.

David believed the Dutchman had already had time to get out of the house with the diamonds, and he devoted himself to his own program, which was to bring about his final interview with his employer. He let that enraged gentleman go his own way in search of the runaway Dutchman, and went up to his own room to fetch the few things he deemed necessary for rescuing the girl and leaving the scene of action.

He thought it not unlikely that he would be stopped and later pursued in such an endeavor, and he had no mind to sally forth unequipped.

The door of his room was ajar, and the fact puzzled him, for he had left it closed. He decided that the housekeeper must have forgotten to shut it after she had cleaned the room. He moved swiftly filling his pockets with various things. He put the map of the Thames in his breast pocket and the life-preserver, which was in his suitcase, in the left hand side pocket of his coat. The right still held Mr. Zack's pistol, a far more fatal weapon, but one never knew when silence might not be as effective as deadliness, and a life-preserver possessed that virtue. He took a bottle of iodine, two clean handkerchiefs, a pen-knife and a spare soft collar. He also changed into rubber-soled shoes.

He had reached the corridor which led to the ground floor stairway, and on which the laboratory and study opened, in time to see Mr. Blenkiron appear on the stairs. He was red in the face with exertion and he was still holding the pistol. At the sight of the young man he scowled but said nothing.

David cursed beneath his breath, for until he could get that automatic out of the financier's hand he would not be at an advantage. He could certainly use Mr. Zack's pistol without taking it out of his pocket, but he had to know where Ann was imprisoned first.

And so for the third time in ten minutes he held his hand, and followed Mr. Blenkiron who had just flung open the study door. But Blenkiron had scarcely stepped a yard into the room when Van Loon's voice rang out sharply.

"Drop that gun, Blenkiron! Drop it, at once!"

David checked himself in mid-stride outside the door. The Dutchman was on the other side of it, pointing a revolver at the financier's back. He was not aware of the young man's presence.

Mr. Blenkiron came to an abrupt standstill, and obeyed the urgent demand in Van Loon's voice, which was the voice of a man who knew what he wanted.

"Drop it," he said again.

Mr. Blenkiron dropped it, and slowly turned round so that he could see his enemy. He had not forgotten that the small pistol he had used to disable Mr. Roberts at Paddington lay snugly in his left hip-pocket. His eyes were hidden as he waited his chance. The Dutchman began to speak.

"Wise man, Blenkiron, wise man. I want to tell you just why I'm going to kill you. But before that I thank you for diamonds worth perhaps eighty, maybe a hundred thousand pounds. They are good diamonds, very good indeed, oh yes! But you have bullied and used me, and that is expensive!

"Now I am going to shoot you because you annoyed me—and because it will be easier that way. You have a neck that is not made for strangling. It is too thick, oh yes, much too thick. So, I raise the pistol so—until it is level with your eyes which are so strangely without color, and I begin to press the trigger—slowly—slowly—ah!"

IT WAS at this moment that David launched himself and saved Mr. Blenkiron's life; not because he valued it for itself but because without it the man would be unable to divulge what he had done with Ann.

He took a little run, which was silent by reason of his rubber-soled shoes, and leaped through the doorway, catching the unsuspecting Dutchman in the small of the back with both feet. The shock flung the tall man forward on his knees and forced the revolver from his hand. David fell right over him and regained his feet in one movement.

But at precisely the same second Mr. Blenkiron's hand slid back to his left hip-pocket and came forward again, and as it came he fired. It was the quickest draw David had ever seen, and he had watched experts practising on the range. The flash of the explosion seemed to strike his eyes, and he felt the breath of the bullet as it passed him and struck Van Loon in the body.

"Got you, you thief," snapped the financier, and his eyes appeared for a moment. He took a step forward as the wounded Dutchman half-rose and clutched the air.

"Where are those diamonds?" demanded Mr. Blenkiron. "I'm going to shoot again." The Dutchman coughed.

"Life—" he said obscurely and falling forward on his face again, lay motionless.

The financier immediately put his pistol in his pocket and kneeling down, ran his fingers through the unconscious man's pockets.

"He hasn't got them," he wailed. "He hasn't got them!"

It was David's chance. He pulled out his bludgeon, stepped up behind Mr. Blenkiron and hit him smartly in the ribs.

"Get up," he snapped. "Get up and talk. What have you done with Miss Brunton?"

The financier grunted like a surprised pig and got to his feet, anger and incredulous amazement written on every line of his face.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" he demanded, and his hand moved quickly down to his pocket. It was the movement for which David had been waiting. He used the bludgeon again.

The financier howled, and clasped a numbed elbow with his other hand. To make assurance complete David struck the other elbow, and had the satisfaction of producing another howl and another limp arm.

"That's enough!" he said loudly. "You can't shoot me! Speak up. Where is she? I'm going to beat the fat stuffing out of you until you tell me!" And he hit his employer swiftly, twice, each time in soft and tender spots.

"Ouch!" said Mr. Blenkiron, and danced away. David followed him, hitting him hard and quickly and judiciously wherever he could strike with effect.

"You young swine! Stop it! My God, if I could get my hands on you!" wailed the financier, but he could not, and he was beginning to realize it.

"Come on!" David urged him, driving him from behind the shelter of the desk. Mr. Blenkiron jumped and howled, and howled and jumped, and all the while he kept his face toward his assailant. He made an ineffectual grab at the pistol Van Loon had made him drop, but the muscles of his arm refused to obey the message from his brain.

"Don't howl!" the young man beseeched him. "Talk and talk sense! Where is she?" He kept between Mr. Blenkiron and the doorway.

Then the financier made one last and foolish bid for peace.

"She's dead," he said. "For God's sake stop."

"Oh!" David muttered between his teeth, and before he had time to realise that the man was lying, he yielded to a sudden savage impulse and brought the bludgeon down on the crown of the square head. Instantly, he saw the foolishness of the action, for he read the lie even as he struck. It was too late.

Mr. Blenkiron staggered a few paces, tripped over the body of Van Loon and dropped like a pole-axed ox all over the floor. But as he fell, he hit the corner of the bookcase with his shoulder, and it swung partially back before David's wondering eyes. He stared at the black cave it disclosed and then at the recumbent figure in front of it.

"Well, I'm damned!" he said softly, and with a sudden intuition stepped forward to investigate. He pushed the bookcase open to its widest and saw the electric torch lying in the niche at the back. He seized it, pushed up the button with his thumb, and in its light saw a flight of stone steps leading down into a yawning chasm of darkness.

"Ann!" he called, and again "*ANN!*"

THE echoes carried the name, taunting him with repetitions, but no answer came. The next moment he was hurrying down the steps, with hope beating in his heart. The steps dropped in a long straight flight and at the bottom ended in a wide passage which seemed to continue for ever. The torch was powerful but it failed to penetrate the full length of it.

There was a squat, ancient door, however, twenty yards down it, and David kicked it, shouting the girl's name again.

Then he heard her voice somewhere on the other side.

"David! David!"

"It's all right! It's all right!" he called, and saw the heavy bolts. He dragged them back but the door would not yield. He noticed the lock; Blenkiron would have the key of it.

"It's locked!" he said. "I'm going for the key. I shan't be a minute."

He turned, and ran up the steps like a man possessed, while the girl, utterly exhausted by the promise of deliverance, finding the door at last, sank down and pressed her face against it.

He had come. In spite of all the reasons why he should not, he had come.

The study was just as David had left it. He realized his luck, for in his anxiety to put his intuition concerning the secret stairway to the test he had forgotten the shot with which the financier had wounded Van Loon. The sound of it, however, had been either unheard, or if the professor who was presumably still in the laboratory, had heard it, he had ignored it intentionally. He would not be in a frame of mind to have anything further to do with the more violent aspects of life.

David ran quickly to the door and locked it before turning his attention to Mr. Blenkiron, whose inert figure lay sprawling by the bookcase.

His pockets were full. Their contents included the small pistol with which he had shot Van Loon, four clips for the larger automatic lying on the floor by the fireplace, a well filled note-case and lastly, a large old-fashioned key which David appropriated with some eagerness. He also welcomed the armory as an additional safeguard in case of pursuit and subtracted forty pounds in fivers from the note-case, being a month's salary in lieu of notice on behalf of Ann and himself. They would need funds.

Having completed this ravaging of his employer's personal effects he tore the curtain ropes from their holders and bound him hand and foot as tightly and permanently as he could.

He had neither the time nor the need to examine the Dutchman, who had not moved since his collapse. He was obviously sufficiently wounded to be out of the game. But the thought of leaving him unattended indefinitely was neither palatable nor humane, and David considered the question in perplexity. His qualms, however, were set at rest by the sound of some one trying the handle of the door, followed by the professor's voice; which had something of its old forcefulness.

"Blenkiron! Blenkiron! There's something I don't like going on in the wood!"

David did not wait to satisfy the curiosity which these words engendered. He rolled the unconscious financier through the gap exposed by the bookcase, glanced quickly about the room to make sure that he had overlooked nothing in detail, switched on the torch and stepping into the darkness over the financier's body, pulled the bookcase into position. It closed with a slight click, and he set off down the stairs with the key of Ann's prison in his hand.

The next minute the door was open and he had her head on his shoulder. All memory of the way in which they had parted had faded from their minds, and the kiss he had snatched might never have come between them.

Then she was asking questions, and rapidly he told her what had happened in the laboratory after the financier had come in and said that she had gone to the village—the success of the experiment, the examination of the stones, Van Loon's trick, the bullying of Professor Massaroon and the final scene in which the Dutchman had been shot and the financier outwitted and disabled.

"So we hold the winning cards," David finished. "We're all but free of this damnable business. Blenkiron will clear out with the accursed diamonds and he won't bother about such small fry as ourselves."

"Yes. He's going to Brussels to a woman called 'Mabel'," Ann said. "I happened to see a letter in which he told her he was coming and that he was swindling Mr. Fox out of his diamonds. It was because of that that he shut me up down here—he was afraid I

would warn Mr. Fox, though why I should, I don't know. I've never seen the man. Perhaps he was making quite sure that there should be no potential weakness in his plan. I'm sorry for Mr. Fox, but he must be a rather silly man, to trust our Mr. Blenkiron."

"'Ours' no longer," said the young man. "Come on. I've half a hope that this passage comes out well away from the house. If it doesn't we must go back and get into the house before Blenkiron recovers himself."

THEY ran hand in hand, the bright beam of the electric torch showing them the way. The passage followed its original direction with a straightness which made David's suspicion certainty, and he blessed the unknown designer who was responsible. The corridor varied neither in height nor breadth, and there was room for them to move comfortably abreast.

Once or twice the girl looked back over her shoulder fearful least the echo of her footsteps prove to be pursuit. David reassured her.

"We've beaten Blenkiron. He's nothing to be afraid of now, and when he does get free he'll look for those diamonds before he bothers his aching head about us. In any case I've got two of his pistols, to say nothing of Van Loon's, in my pocket, and they may easily be the only firearms in the place."

"I know. But I can't help remembering that he's at the other end of this darkness even if he is all tied up."

David estimated that they had already traveled two hundred yards from the house in a southerly direction, and he expressed his satisfaction.

"We're getting well beyond the ring of Dutchmen, assuming that they're not already in the house investigating the excitement, which reminds me that Blenkiron told Van Loon to institute a search party for you about twenty minutes ago and it will have depleted the ranks of his precious gamekeepers. But, anyhow, I've four pistols! I pity any one who tries to stop me now!"

"You've found your feet at last," suddenly the girl remarked with an odd pleasure in her voice. The reaction after her ordeal in the cellar had set in.

David said nothing, but privately he was inclined to agree with her.

As he spoke he saw an upward flight of steps in front of them, and he stopped the girl when they came to it. The beam of the torch lost itself in darkness before the top.

"Come after me," he directed, and led the way up, noticing that dead leaves and vegetable rubbish lay on the steps. He reached a flat space, perhaps six feet square and turned the torch back to light the steps for the girl, and for the first time saw the pitiful condition in which she was.

"My God!" he said. "Why the devil didn't I kill the swine! Ann, my dear, you're hurt?"

It was a natural question, for her white face and torn blouse might well have indicated some wound. She shook her head and turned the torch aside.

"No. Really no. But please don't look at me—I know I'm in a horrible state of dirt and muddiness. It wasn't a very clean cellar."

David turned the shaft of light on a heavy curtain of fibrous ivy branches which formed an opaque and apparently impenetrable door. It would be the end of the passage.

"I fancy we're out," he said, and after switching off the torch, thrust a way through and held the thick ropes apart for Ann.

They were standing in a natural dell in the depths of the woods. It was twilight in the open world as the green sky showed through the tree tops, but the shadows were black in the woods, and night would make them but little darker.

"Listen," whispered David, and put an arresting hand on the girl's wrist.

The trees were still and the birds silent, as if on the threshold of evening and the full mystery of night. David, for all his anxiety, was aware of Ann's nearness to him in the strangeness of their surroundings. To come out into such peace after the darkness of the passage and the violence of what lay at the other end was like reaching a swift turn in a ridiculous dream. Both aspects seemed unreal, yet both were vivid in their impression on the mind.

David drew a deep breath, and for the first time spoke aloud, if cautiously.

"Well, that's that—so far."

"What do we do next?"

"Strike south—we must be near the edge of the wood—and make for the river. Once there I can use the map—I brought it along—and we'll find a village other than Sommerford Keys, which would be an

injudicious neighborhood for us to patronize at the moment. We'll put up at some inn where you can have a bath, and in the morning we'll hold a council of war. I think we'd better seek out Mr. Zack later on—he said he'd help us. I told you I'd seen him, didn't I, and that he is grateful? I've half a mind to keep him to his promise—" David was already beginning to plan her future—"He's a good soul, is Mr. Zack."

Suddenly a voice addressed them from the brink of the dell immediately behind where they were standing—a cheerful Rhodesian voice.

"Thanks for those kind words, young man. I'll certainly keep my promises—but in the meantime could you tell me if Percy is likely to come out of that hole? We are playing badger with him."

CHAPTER IX

DAVID GOULD laughed as he saw Mr. Zack. He was not greatly surprised. Zack had a way of appearing in crises. And while this was no longer, perhaps, precisely a crisis, the air was not as yet wholly clear.

"This is the young lady?" asked Zack. "And Percy—your amiable friend, Blenkiron?"

"He had Miss Brunton in a cellar. The professor made his diamonds and almost burned everything up doing it. Van Loon stole them. Then he tried to kill Blenkiron—but I wanted to find out about Miss Brunton, so I stopped him. He shot Van Loon—then I laid him out and tied him up. You'll find him at the end of the passage."

"Thanks so much!" said Zack. "Look me up at the Regal Societies Club in Town. Good night!"

He was gone. David and Ann looked at one another and laughed. Then she grew sober.

"But, David, Blenkiron is still dangerous to us!" she said. "He knows I shot at Lipsheimer. He knows you were threatening him with a pistol just before he was found—shot! What are we to do?"

"Get away from here and get cleaned up, first. Then we'll talk."

The moon was hanging low in the Eastern sky when they came to Ashton Keys, some two and a half miles from the Mill House and two miles beyond Sommerford, which caution bade them avoid. They had passed out of the Mill House wood without untoward incident, neither hearing nor seeing anything to indicate what was happening about the house itself. Mr. Zack's badger hunt appeared to be an affair conducted with silent discretion under cover of the friendly dusk.

David, with newly awakened feelings of adventurousness, would have liked to watch matters, but Ann needed food and rest as soon as they could be safely procured, and he consulted his map when they came to the river. He noticed the word "Inn" printed at the point where the first road crossed the young Thames after Sommerford Keys. It was situated a few hundred yards from the village of Ashton Keys and by the map would be an ideal shelter for the night by reason of its isolation. In it they would be safe from pursuit and when morning brought fresh vigor they could discuss their further program.

That two and a half miles was as much as Ann could have managed, and it was a very weary girl who followed David into the stone-flagged hallway of the little roadhouse. She sank into a chair while he explained their needs to the landlord, a shaven headed old gentleman with rheumy, blind eyes, who was just closing the door for the night when they arrived.

"This lady and I are from Cirencester," David said. "We went for a walk this afternoon and lost our way. We should like rooms for the night. Also if—er—the lady of the house could look after my friend I should be obliged. She unfortunately fell into a marsh in the dark."

The old man eyed the girl's condition with concern and then called over his shoulder: "Visitors! Martha! Come here!"

And thus did the wanderers solve the problem of a night's rest.

David, aware of extreme fatigue, crawled into bed after a lonely bread-and-cheese supper, for the girl had bathed and gone straight to bed under the sternly maternal eye of the landlord's wife. He was not a little relieved to have brought what was likely to prove in subsequent retrospect the most unpleasant phase of the whole adventure to a successful conclusion.

He admitted to himself, before he fell asleep, that he owed not a little to luck, but at the same time he was prepared to concede that he had acted with fair judgment on

several occasions. He had a sleepy vision of himself as he had appeared in the rôle of knight errant and adventurer, and was not unpleased with it. That he should have crossed swords with and beaten a scoundrel like Mr. Blenkiron, and met and earned praise from an adventurer like Mr. Zack, were comfortably exhilarating facts on which to look back.

Ann was a dear and mighty good it had been to champion her cause. He was almost disappointed in some respects, now that it was all over, that things had not been more difficult; more dangerous and adventurous. He considered the comparative ease with which he had dealt with Mr. Blenkiron when matters had come to a head, and felt a little ashamed of the thread of caution which had colored his earlier activities. A great deal of Ann's trouble and hardship had been unnecessary in that he might have brought them sooner to an end by moving briskly and with confidence when the urge had first come upon him.

He was too tired, perhaps, to remember that of all passing things emotion leads the most swiftly toward forgetfulness. In his success he had recovered from and forgotten the anxieties which had besieged him in the many moments of waiting and watching he had had to endure of sheer necessity. He could not have acted a moment sooner than he had.

Mr. Blenkiron, however, was exploded as an exaggerated bogey by the time David drifted into dreamless slumber in the top bedroom of the inn by the riverside.

ANN, on the other hand, had no retrospective regrets, for that matter, any thoughts at all beyond a feeling of thankfulness toward the young man, and even this passed almost at once into a general consideration of him. She found that his personality was beginning to produce an impression in her mind both vivid and consistent; but also so permanent that she wondered why she experienced no discomfort from it. But she did not wonder long, for her feminine intuition told her that if it was indeed like that, then it was well. Quite detachedly, however, she decided that it was strange that one could become almost as conscious of somebody else as one was conscious of oneself.

His face was curiously clear in her vision as her mind lost consciousness, and it seemed to persist even beyond the borderland of wakefulness, and sleep into her dreams.

They ate breakfast together once again, this morning at the wide, open bay window of the coffee-room of the inn which overlooked the river from the first floor. The table had been placed in the bay of the window and they sat opposite one another, feasted sumptuously and talked. The morning sun was hot, and the ancient stone bridge below was a warm, patchy gray and yellow with mingled sunlight and lichen. The river sparkled, and slid with small musical noises round the smooth boulders.

It was, David felt, a good morning on which to be alive.

Ann had dealt with the ravages of the day before in an effective manner; the landlady had given her a clean blouse and removed the stains from her skirt. David thought of the vast interval which existed since their breakfast at the Criterion Brasserie; a matter of three days if it was to be reckoned by time, but by experience many months. He knew that human lives, following their courses, sometimes converged, but he wondered if the phenomenon was often marked by such swift movement. It seemed unlikely.

He discussed the past and the future with confidence.

"As far as I can see nothing can happen to us with regard to the Mill House business. There may be a police inquiry of sorts if Mr. Zack has caused any damage or if Van Loon dies of his wound, which somehow I don't think he will. And Mr. Zack seems to be a wary customer; he won't ruin his chance of more adventures by getting in badly with the authorities over a little matter like Blenkiron. He may get the diamonds from him, and if he does I doubt if Blenkiron would have any kick. The whole thing is too fishy to stand the light of day. Personally I hope Mr. Zack has settled it all by this time, and shifted Blenkiron's attention from us. After all the brute realizes now that we're not going to be bluffed about Reuben Lipsheimer, and obviously we're no more use to him unless we're in his power."

"And in any case he is going to Brussels," said Ann. "I'm sure he's by way of being in love with this Mabel."

"But will he go to her without his diamonds?"

"That is another matter. I don't know. Perhaps not. Certainly from the look of things he was regarding the diamonds as capital with which to enter new pastures. Supposing Mr. Zack takes these stones from him, could the professor make more?"

DAVID considered this question for the first time.

"Not for Blenkiron," he said. "The professor would sooner die. He's something of a fanatic, and in his state of mind there is only one thing worth while, giving the perfected secret of his rays to science and humanity. I told you how the experiment went wrong. If the heat is always going to get out of hand and the retort melt and fall through the house like that it becomes a risky kind of experiment.

"Of course Massaroon may be able to get over those weaknesses in it, but not if Blenkiron is concerned in the scheme. He hates the man like poison. No; if any more synthetic diamonds are made it will be under other patronage; Robert's or Mr. Zack's, perhaps. But this is all over and done with. We're out of it, and we have to get some constructive policy to work on. Er—we might get married, for instance."

"*Get married!*" said Ann, as though the suggestion fell from a cloudless, unsuspected sky, "Why?"

"Why?" David repeated, and regarded her sternly. "Because it would be a sensible thing to do. Constructive, and so on."

Ann's eyes were twinkling.

"You're clever David. I see what you're up to. You're beginning to get me 'accustomed to the idea.' "

He nodded somberly.

"That's it. Please register my first proposal."

"It shall be duly registered. I have to thank you for your suggestion of today's date, and beg to state that—"

"Flip away," David said. "But remember that I'm serious."

"Of course you are, David. But isn't it a bit soon to talk about these things? Are we out of the wood?"

"Out of it? Most certainly!"

"Have we any money? Any solid beginnings?" she asked quietly.

"Ah—um," said David.

"And is the ghost of Reuben Lipsheimer dead? We're fugitives still, David. We will never know, night or day, what the next moment will bring while that affair remains unsolved. I've thought it over and over till my head whirls. His valet knew that you went up to see him, and the man didn't know when I left because I let myself out. He didn't see you leave either for the same reason. Both of us are suspected, and in the minds of the police, one of us killed him. They must still be looking for us, although the papers dropped the subject after the second day, probably because Scotland Yard asked them to."

David agreed, and asked:

"Speaking of his valet, did you see any statement by him in the newspaper reports?"

"No. It made me all the more nervous. The police probably attach a lot of importance to his evidence and did not want to let us know by publicity how much they knew."

"It's a damnable business!" he said, and frowned. He had instinctively avoided all thought of the matter for the same reason that the girl had discovered. It made one's head whirl and got one no further.

"So there it is," she said.

He nodded.

"You're quite right. In these days you always are."

She asked him a question.

"Were those pearls of your mother's worth a lot of money?"

"About forty thousand pounds."

"He just—stole them?"

"Yes; he denied that the money he lent us on them had ever been repaid. And whoever killed him has got them; the safe in which they were was empty when his body was found. Even if they are recovered, which is extremely unlikely, I could never prove they are mine."

Ann was silent, regarding his clear cut profile as he looked down at the river. It was not the profile of the man who had to deal with people like the late Reuben Lipsheimer. She remembered the moneylender well. He had been shrewd; excessively shrewd.

"Some more coffee?" she said, and he turned from his dream of what forty thousand pounds could have done for him now.

"No, thanks. Now look here, Ann, I have an idea. We'll do the river."

"*Do* the river?"

"Yes. Why not? It's a wonderful trip and who would think of looking for us on it? We'll buy a canoe at Ashton Keys

and take her down-stream. This weather ought to hold for another fortnight. It will give things time to blow over, the diamond-making and the other business, and then we'll go to Mr. Zack and tell him how we stand. We might even go to South Africa, he knows it, and we'll start life together; a new life. Obviously we've got to do that sometime and somewhere. One is always reading and hearing about people who do that! why shouldn't we? Imagine it! A new country; opportunities; freedom from worry, everything worth while. Magnificent!"

The girl smiled, and disregarding his air castles returned to his canoeing project.

"You know the river?"

"Every drop of it, I think. Shall we do it?"

"If you think it can be managed. We will have to get some clothes and things."

"Of course. We'll get to Ashton Keys as quickly as possible and do our shopping. We won't buy more than is absolutely necessary. We have only forty pounds between us, and we will have to spend a good deal on meals and bedrooms."

Ann laughed with mingled delight and amusement.

"I suppose we're both mad to take a summer holiday at such a time."

He nodded.

"Yes. Pleasantly mad. Now let us pay our landlord and be on our way. Here's to the holiday! May the gods favor us!" And he poured the coffee grounds from his cup out of the window by way of libation.

He rang the bell and when the landlord came, paid the bill and asked the way to Cirencester. It was as well to keep up appearances.

AN HOUR later they finished with Ashton Keys. It had yielded two suitcases, a certain quantity of clothes, toilet necessities, and a small canoe, which David examined to his satisfaction and bought from the grocer who owned her. Ten minutes haggling brought the price down from twelve to eight pounds, and they established themselves and their belongings on board her. Before pushing off David studied the map, and decided that the first few miles would be the most difficult on account of shallowness, although the canoe drew a scant six inches of water. Strictly speaking navigation was not considered reasonable at that time of year above Cricklade, some five miles down-stream. Once there, however, they could if they wished paddle the two hundred miles to the sea without trouble from lack of depth.

The morning passed lazily, and left an impression in both their minds which they would never forget. They were young and the romance of the thing found place in their emotions. A sense of safety which had hitherto been denied them, stole upon them, and the soft gliding movement of the canoe was like an eternal lullaby to their fears. On such a morning and in such isolation it would have been impossible to view the world as anything but a well-meaning and friendly place in which the young were highly favored.

Ann lay in the bottom of the canoe, her head propped up with cushions so that she could see the procession of the landscape on either side, and David, perched on the suitcases in the farthest stern, wielded a paddle with long, smooth strokes which kept the little craft at an even speed. The girl had her back to him, and he could watch the warm sun playing with the red-gold lights in her heavy brown hair.

He decided that he could not ask, in justice, anything more of the world. The fact that all they possessed was bounded by the limits of the canoe had no significance, while that their total furniture was contained in the suitcases upon which he sat did not have any real meaning for him. A few pistols, a few cartridges, a life-preserver with a removable head, a bottle of iodine, a map, a penknife, the scantiest wardrobe and two cardboard suitcases was little enough with which to start life, but if he could have told himself that the girl with the red-gold lights in her hair was his wife he cheerfully would have traded paradise for the fact.

But she was right. One could not marry on such a flimsy, tottering foundation as that on which the material edifice of their love was built. One had to eat and sleep and live beneath a roof, and to eat one had to have food, and to sleep one had to possess a bed, while living beneath a roof entailed innumerable expenses from gas bills to coffee-percolators. Thirty pounds and fourpence, and no prospect of further resources to take the place of that when it was spent, was not a financial condition to encourage matrimony. It took three weeks

for the law of the country to marry people, what with licenses and certificates. So that even if they decided to get married at once they would have to wait three weeks, while in order to live through that period and pay for such licenses and certificates they would have to spend the thirty pounds, to say nothing of the fourpence.

At noon they passed under the aqueduct which carried the North Wiltshire Canal over the river, and at twelve forty-five, taking the advice of the map, they lodged the canoe at "Rose Cottage" Cricklade. Presently they sat down to lunch at *The White Hart* in the main street of the town, and felt pleased with themselves. All was well with the present and the future might take care of itself.

But with dessert adventure returned to them with a shattering suddenness; it burst over them like a shell and enveloped them in a blinding dust of unknown and unguessable dimensions. Once again they were grappling with alarm and the necessity of action. The pleasant holiday had come to an abrupt end.

CHAPTER X

ANN, who faced the door of the dining-room, suffered the first shock. Suddenly she put down the apple she was about to eat, and gripped the edge of the table, her eyes dilated with mingled horror and amazement. David's heart was in his throat with apprehension as he turned his head to see what she was seeing.

Standing in the doorway side by side and dressed in motoring coats were Mr. Blenkiron and the Dutchman, Van Loon. They were deciding in amicable discussion where they would sit and David realized that they had not yet been seen by them. The Dutchman's right arm was in a sling and bound close to his body inside his overcoat, and his grayish face was paler than ever. But in spite of these things he appeared to bear the financier no malice.

It was this fact, above even the fact that accident or intention had brought these two men to *The White Hart* at that particular moment, which struck David's mind and set up a train of unanswerable questions. What were they doing together? Eighteen hours before they had been for murdering one another with all the hatred in the world; what had brought them together again? Mr. Zack? Where was Mr. Zack? Had he failed or succeeded in whatever he had been about when he dived into the secret passage? What were these two doing in Cricklade, nearly ten miles from the Mill House? If they were in pursuit with what object? Revenge? It seemed scarcely likely; more probably they were on some journey and the long arm of coincidence had brought them to *The White Hart.*

"Keep your face down!" David told the girl. "The room is full. They may choose a table far enough away for us to get out without them seeing us."

He was carrying the small automatic pistol (the rest of the armory was at the bottom of one of the suitcases), but even as he instinctively put his hand in his pocket he realized that this was no place for an artillery demonstration. There were perhaps fourteen lunchers in the room, and in that fact lay a certain temporary safety. It was just as impossible for Blenkiron to use force as it was for him.

Considering the unexpectedness of the whole affair David's appreciation of it was creditably without panic. He felt that in whatever happened next he would have the advantage of the diamond makers, for while he had seen them and recovered from his surprise they had still to see him.

He watched the financier lead the way to a small table in the middle of the room, and the moment the two were seated and had begun to consult the menu card together, he motioned to the girl.

"Now," he said, and rose with her. In silence they walked to the door, and in keeping their faces averted from the table in the middle of the room, were unaware whether they were seen or not. It was a nervous business, and only partially successful. David reached the door a little ahead of Ann, and opened it quickly. At the same moment he heard Mr. Blenkiron's exclamation and out of the corner of his eye saw him jump to his feet and move toward the door.

David thrust the girl through it, closed it and seizing her by the arm hurried down the short passage which led to the front door of the hotel.

"If we can get into that alley which leads down to the river, we may shake them," he said. "I can't understand this at all. They've been looking for us; I'm sure of it. Blenkiron had it in his eye."

"But why?" asked the girl. "Simply because you—"

They came to an abrupt halt. Three stalwart game-keepers from Holland stood on the narrow threshold facing them. In their demeanor was firm decision not to permit the two to pass. One of them had his arms outstretched.

David frowned, and clenched his fists at the sight of this opposition and heard an urgent voice giving an order somewhere behind him. The voice was Van Loon's, and he spoke in Dutch.

At the same moment David drove his fist into the nearest game-keeper's face and kicked another on the shin, creating the moment of confusion he needed. Then he dragged the girl through the porch into the roadway almost colliding with a policeman who came out of the bar of the hotel surreptitiously sucking his mustache.

David was eager to seize an opportunity. He waved his arm at the recovering game-keepers, and said loudly but inaccurately:

"Germans!"

The Dutchmen aided him by their excitable exchange of words—Dutch words—and the policeman, to whom the Treaty of Versailles was but a myth and Germany still a mortal enemy, lumbered smartly in their direction as Van Loon and Mr. Blenkiron appeared in the doorway.

David and the girl were on the other side of the road, and turning into the alley which would take them to Rose Cottage, by the time the group in front of the hotel had sorted itself out. If there was an immediate chase they saw nothing of it, and the expeditious manner in which the young man tossed a shilling to the boatman and got Ann aboard the canoe was the final step in the escape.

Three minutes' paddling sufficed to put a left-hand bend in the river between them and Rose Cottage, the only point to which investigation might come, and the thing was accomplished—for the time being.

DAVID had no illusions on the subject.

"They're mighty close to us," he said. "Maybe we're finished with them. But what I want to know is the species of bite from which our friends were suffering. What did they want with us? Is Blenkiron so angry at our leaving him that he feels it incumbent upon him to tell us so forcibly, with all those Dutchmen?"

Ann made a suggestion.

"Perhaps Van Loon has convinced Mr. Blenkiron that we have those diamonds."

"And has brought him along, wound and all, in case he's lying?"

"It might be that."

He shook his head and said:

"Well, we haven't the diamonds, and I don't believe Van Loon could convince him with such an obvious lie. Blenkiron practically saw him take them. No; it was a sudden desire for revenge."

"But what about Mabel, the girl in Brussels? If he had the diamonds he would be going to her."

David tried to dismiss the matter, assuring her that she had struck the real explanation.

"I'd forgotten her. That proves that the meeting was accidental. He *was* on his way to her."

"With all those Dutchmen and Van Loon? And is Cricklade on the London road from Sommerford Keys?"

David gave it up.

"You've got the most inquisitive mind, Ann, that I've ever come across. If you will have it, I'm dashed if I know what it is all about, but I'm pretty sure that means something unpleasant for us if we don't get clear this time."

The girl laughed sympathetically.

"Poor David, I'm a severe trial to you, am I not? Ever since you became my friend you've been in trouble, and, as you say, it isn't finished yet. My dear; if we get out of this awful business alive you have my full permission and consent to marry me. You deserve me. You have a longing for unpleasantness."

"I have—for that variety. Hullo! D'you hear that?"

She did, and with alarm. It was the crackle of a motor-boat's exhaust from upstream, perhaps by Rose Cottage, somewhere out of sight. David turned his head without ceasing to paddle.

"Hm'm," he said, and pulled a suitcase from beneath him. "Get out the pistols, and be ready to give them to me." And he settled down to paddle as he had never paddled before. Fifty yards ahead the river ran through heavy woods, and if they could reach them, beach the canoe, hide it and themselves, there was still a chance.

Ann took the pistols, cartridge-clips and spare ammunition from the bottom of the suitcase and arranged them in a row, ready

to hand. Her face was grim, She also took out the life preserver and swung it in her hand.

"Shall I keep this out?"

He nodded.

"One never knows. Perhaps you could use it—in a pinch."

She examined it and said:

"The top is loose."

"Screw it up. It comes off so that one can regulate the weight by adding or subtracting the lead shot."

She bent over it, twisting the head, and then exclaimed:

"How silly of me! I've quite unscrewed it instead of screwing it up. But there isn't any shot in it."

"Must be," David was straining each stroke of the paddle to its uttermost length.

"No; only some little stones," said Ann, and caught them in her hand as they tumbled out.

"Little stones?" repeated David, and realized now how near the sound of the motor-boat's exhaust was coming. Then again, as the strangeness of the girl's words struck him: "*Little stones?*"

HE BENT forward, and looked at them in her cupped hand.

"My Lord!" he exclaimed, and was silent for a moment as a flood of realization broke upon him. "Now we know what they want. We *have* got the diamonds! Jove! I see what Van Loon meant when he said 'life'—just as he collapsed after Blenkiron shot him. He choked on the word 'preserver'. He must have gone straight up to my room when he stole them to hide them safely, as he thought, until he had dealt with Blenkiron. The bludgeon was in my suit-case, and a minute later I came along and collected it—and spoilt the whole game without knowing it—" He laughed and added: "Why, I hit Blenkiron over the head with his own diamonds!"

The exhaust of the pursuing motor-boat broke suddenly louder upon their ears as she swung round the bend into view. They stared at her, and David spoke quickly:

"I'm damned if he's going to get 'em back! They're *not* his! If they belong to anybody it's that man William Fox. It was he who put up the forty thousand; not Blenkiron. I'm sick of that man's buccaneering habits. Give me that pistol, the one with the long barrel. Thanks. Now take a paddle and get us close in under the trees, under those branches there that come down to the water. Put the diamonds in the pocket of your skirt and stuff a handkerchief on top of them. They're worth a cool hundred thousand to William Fox—and probably something to us."

He turned with Mr. Zack's long-range pistol in hand, and crouched under the shelter of the high stern.

The overhanging branches of a gigantic elm swept down almost to the water and it was behind these that Ann drove the canoe. It was a position of tactical advantage, since they were invisible from the motor-boat which to them would be in full sight.

David realized that he would be able to fire several shots before the pursuers determined his exact position.

The motor-boat indeed held Mr. Blenkiron. The financier was leaning forward over the bow, shading his eyes, and peering at the river. Immediately behind him were the two Dutchmen, of whom the third sat in the stern and steered. Van Loon was not in the boat; as a wounded man he would have been more trouble than assistance. Also Mr. Blenkiron had brought no boatman in the chartered craft, and David was glad.

He aimed carefully at the water-line of the motor-boat, and fired, and discovered that Mr. Zack's pistol was possessed of perfect accuracy. As a Wembley gold-medallist he appreciated it. Over this range, perhaps seventy yards, he could be deadly if need be. He fired four more shots in rapid succession and knew that each was as effective as the first. He judged that there would now be five fair-sized holes in the motor-boat's lower anatomy through which the Thames would enter.

The pursuers were in some confusion. Mr. Blenkiron hastily relinquished his vantage point in the bow in favor of a more sheltered one in the stern, and the two game-keepers ducked their heads; in a minute they would be bailing. David smiled with satisfaction.

So far it had been a bloodless battle, and in a measure successful; but the motor-boat came on with fifty yards to cover before she could be abreast of them.

"They're frightened," David remarked to the girl. "It has occurred to them that if I can plug their boat below the water-line,

I can just as easily plug the men themselves. I wonder why Blenkiron doesn't return my fire? Either he has still to discover where we are or is too busy keeping the water out. Give me that big pistol—"

He emptied the magazine of Mr. Blenkiron's own pistol, eight cartridges into Mr. Blenkiron's own boat, below the water-line as before, and reloaded with one of the spare clips Mr. Blenkiron had so thoughtfully prepared. There were now thirteen holes in the motor-boat through which the river could enter.

"She'll sink," said David. "But she may come close to us first."

And he settled down to fire as rapidly as was consistent with good shooting, still using Mr. Blenkiron's big pistol. In forty seconds he expended thirty shots and the last of the spare clips, and estimated that twenty-eight bullets had been effective, but he deplored the fact that most of them had to be in the same spot, for the steersman was at some pains to keep his boat nose to the fusilade.

It was during this artillery performance that David realized Mr. Blenkiron's cleverness. He knew, did his late employer, that his opponent would not fire to kill, and he came on, in spite of an apparently dangerous bombardment, assured of this fact. He might, indeed, eventually lose the motor-boat, but that would mean nothing to him beyond slight inconvenience, provided he could reach the man who had the diamonds before she sank.

David bit his lip, and reloaded Mr. Zack's pistol from the packet of cartridges the Rhodesian had given him. But there could be no killing in such a place. The river, even as far as they were, was not unpopulated, and at any moment some craft or another might put in an appearance. Be it only a punt, it would cause endless trouble.

David thought fast. He turned to Ann: "Listen carefully, because this is important," he said, "we might get away now, for a while, but we should still be open to pursuit. Next time we might not be so lucky, and there must be no second time. I think I can stop it, but you must do as I say whatever happens. When I say 'Go!' I want you to paddle out of this tree and get into midstream. If I'm not in the canoe, wait for me—if I am, well and good; we'll be off together. But I'm inclined to think I shall have to swim or wade for it at the last moment. Here they come!"

THE motor-boat burst through the branches ten yards away and grazed the bank. She was full of water and swearing men. The engine ceased with a choking cough, and Mr. Blenkiron, brandishing the only pistol the party possessed, scrambled up the bank. On it he shouted:

"Come on! We got them now!"

The three Dutchmen did not understand his words but they gathered his meaning, and followed him as gallantly as the motor-boat, which was half-full of water and settling on the gravel, would allow.

Mr. Blenkiron was perhaps three yards from the canoe when David, to Ann's alarm, did an incomprehensible and foolhardy thing. He pushed the canoe under the bank, and leaped ashore, life-preserver in hand, and started inland through the trees. As he ran he turned and shouted:

"Go!"

Ann went swiftly but with reluctance, paddling through a gap in the branches into open water, where she steadied the little craft, and proceeded to hold her level with the place where he had landed.

The sounds of uproar from behind the screen of trees were quick in coming, and Ann would have given what little she possessed to have been able to see the reason for it. There was much shouting, and the crashing of heavy men through undergrowth. David was being pursued, and when she realized from the movement of sound that he had changed his direction and was running downstream parallel with the river she paddled quickly to keep abreast of him. At any moment she expected to see him, for the trees were now interrupted by patches of cleared space.

Her anxiety was at its worst when at last in one of these clearings two figures appeared. They were those of David and Mr. Blenkiron, and their relative positions told her their respective objects.

The older man was trying to frustrate the younger's efforts to reach the water's edge. The financier was shouting to the others to let them know where he was, and dodging up and down below a slight rise of ground

on which David was moving riverward somewhat hampered by brambles.

Mr. Blenkiron still held the pistol with which he had landed, and apparently he had decided that the time had come to use it. His advantage over the young man was complete, for David was apparently armed only with the life-preserver. It was a fact which puzzled Ann, for she knew he carried the small pistol in his side pocket.

Indeed, his motive for landing at all was obscure, but that he must have had one was certain. That it had brought him into considerable danger, however, was even more certain, and she was aware of extreme misery on his account.

The two men were perhaps twenty yards apart when the mystery became suddenly clear to her, and she understood. The financier stopped dodging, and stood still on the edge of the bank with his pistol raised. At once David saw his intention, steadied himself at the beginning of the unbroken ground below the brambles, and suddenly flung the life-preserver at Mr. Blenkiron's head.

It was a poor throw. The weapon missed its mark by several feet, and, spinning in the sunlight, curved downward in an arc which dropped it in the river ten yards from the bank.

BUT it achieved its object. The financier did not fire; he did nothing for a moment beyond turning swiftly and staring at the spot where it had sunk, consternation in every line of his face and body. He forgot the young man entirely. He did not see him jump past him into the water and begin wading toward the waiting canoe. He merely stood and wrung his hands at the thought of the life-preserver lying at the bottom of the Thames with a hundred thousand pounds' worth of diamonds in its head.

David was waist high in the river, however, when he did see him, and the sight gave him a sudden hope. He clambered down the bank, his eyes, wide and very white, fixed on the place where his fortune had disappeared, and began walking toward it through the water like a golfer who has driven his ball into the rough.

Thus he stepped into the trap which his runaway employee had prepared for him, but so well hidden was it that he saw it neither then nor afterward. He had been telling himself ever since Van Loon had recovered sufficiently to explain what he had done with the diamonds, that the escaping couple would never dream of unscrewing the top of the bludgeon. And now it lay several feet below the surface of the river, and its presence there, however unfortunate, was in no way illogical. That the young man should have flung it at him had been as natural under the circumstances as that he should have missed him with it and that it should have fallen into the water.

He kept his eyes firmly on the spot, and waded. As for David Shaw Gould, he could go. He had been an amazing source of trouble one way and another ever since he had been employed, and the sooner the last was seen of him the better.

AT THIS moment the young man in question was pulling himself over the stern of the canoe and bringing a good deal of water with him. But the thing was done. He seized a paddle, and with the girl's help got quickly under way. His eyes were shining.

It was then that he glanced back at the financier and saw him step into a hole in the river-bed. It suddenly and effectively submerged him. The water rippled and bubbled and was broken by a pair of podgy hands which beat the air for a moment and were followed by a square head. The face that finally emerged was very red and despair was in its expression for the canoe, and the river, and everything else were now in relatively different positions. Mr. Blenkiron, through no fault of his own, had taken his eye off the ball.

He began to struggle out of the hole, clamoring the while for assistance, and two Dutchmen appeared in the clearing he had left. They stared at him in perplexity and, turning, called back to their comrade. The fact that their chief should be standing up to his neck in the middle of the Thames was odd, for the fugitive was nowhere in sight—unless he was on board the canoe which disappeared round the bend as they reached the bank.

They stood and regarded Mr. Blenkiron's head with stolid but inactive interest. His face was a red blotch in the sheen of sunlit river, and from his mouth there issued a lurid but quite incomprehensible bellowing.

CHAPTER XI

THAT night Ann and David journeyed toward London in a third-class compartment of a Great Western Railway train, and in spite of the fact that the compartment was otherwise empty, they sat rather close together in one corner. It was a warm summer's night and through the open window came a refreshing movement of air.

They had caught the train at Lechlade, some eleven miles below the place where Mr. Blenkiron had walked into the river in pursuit of his fortune, and throughout the rest of the day there had been no sign that they were sought by the financier or the police acting on a charge laid by him. Lechlade had been the first town or village after Cricklade which boasted a railway station, and David had decided that a railway station was what they wanted.

The fact that the diamonds were in their possession had entirely altered any plans they had made earlier, shattering their dream of a leisurely down-river trip, and plunging them once more into the adventure of which they had assured themselves they were forever free. The diamonds were the central and integral climax of the whole affair from everybody's point of view, save perhaps their own.

Mr. Blenkiron and Mr. Zack had come to grips over them; at various times Mr. Blenkiron had engaged in violent and physical altercation with Professor Massaroon, Van Loon, Ann Brunton and David himself, always on account of them; he had shot Mr. Roberts before they were made, because of them; and local life in Sommerford Keys, Ashton Keys, and Cricklade had been in some way affected.

A motor-boat had been sunk and a lot of ammunition expended with the diamonds as a *casus belli;* and counting the gamekeepers, David could think of twenty-two people who had been engaged in plotting or fighting or both with the diamonds as their excuse while Heaven alone knew how many others there had been in the game either in London at different times under Mr. Roberts or in the Mill House wood on the night of the evacuation under Mr. Zack.

And now the only two of that number whose interest had not been in their parts, and whose mutual idea from the beginning had been to get out of the dangerous business as soon as possible, were in possession of the objects on account of which all these things had come to pass. They were free, also, to come and go as they pleased; nobody knew they had the stones; nobody would suspect it for a moment, and although Mr. Blenkiron, and Van Loon, incidentally an example of how mutual but thwarted greed can bring deadly enemies into alliance, were the only people who might have thought it, the financier knew quite well, and would convince the Dutchman, that the life-preserver, in whose top the diamonds were, was no longer among the young man's belongings but lying at the bottom of the Thames.

It might take that precious pair a week to find the weapon and thus their mistake, and by that time the matter would have been settled as far as Ann and David were concerned, for they were deciding upon an immediate, definite and beneficial course of action, and one which David now urged, sitting by the girl's side with her arm in his.

"I'M counting on this man William Fox seeing the thing from the business point of view," he said. "We have saved his diamonds for him, and they *are* his if they are anybody's because he put up the forty thousand to have 'em made, and he ought to be properly grateful to us. If it hadn't been for us—I take credit for it you'll notice—he would have had about as much chance of getting his hands on a single blessed stone as he would have of turning Blenkiron into an honest man. To be such a fool he must be fairly honest. He'll do the right thing—he can afford to."

"Honest men don't hide behind curtains, do they?" asked Ann.

"Kings of finance are notoriously eccentric," he protested.

"And he knows about Robert Lipsheimer, somehow."

"I dare say, but I'm not going to plank down the diamonds and say 'here you are; I've been a good boy and won't you recognize it in a fitting manner and forget that I appear to have slaughtered a well-known moneylender'. I'm going to tell him that I have the stones and that I am willing to part with them on terms."

"But that would be blackmail!" cried the girl.

"Of course it would. And why not? Haven't they been blackmailing us? Getting our valuable services for this disreputable adventure by holding the police over our heads. Blackmail! It's a magnificent chance! I've never blackmailed anybody before and I've always wanted to."

She laughed and squeezed his arm.

"I'm afraid you're an adventurer, David. A thorough, unscrupulous adventurer. It comes of being with Mr. Blenkiron so much."

"Or meeting Mr. Zack. That's another point. Mr. Zack would never forgive me if I gave back the diamonds without demanding something for them. As it is, I'm afraid he'll be angry with me for not appropriating them out of hand. He'll probably prove conclusively to me that I had every right to, anyway, when I tell him all about it. The trouble is that at the moment good and evil are getting mixed up in my moral constitution. The thought of acquiring a hundred thousand pounds in such an engagingly simple manner is beginning to go to my head."

She looked at him quickly, earnestly, and then laughed again.

"You're joking now. You know I'm never quite sure—"

"Joking! I tell you, my sense of right and wrong is wobbling."

"Then I must stop it wobbling."

They were silent for a while, and the train sped through the night toward the city, toward the millions bustling in the vortices of their individual destinies. They were to join that throng for a little, wedging a phase of their lives into the phalanx of other lives. David considered the fact, and did not like it. London was a place of strange memories, now, some cruel, some kind, but all of them poignant in their effect and significance. London, or more locally the Thames in London, had given him Ann; but it had also tried, with various efforts, to take her away from him. He had kept her so far, however, but now they were going back into the maelstrom and there was still danger. A knowledge of London's capacity for dealing out the unexpected had become ingrained in him.

He could not disguise from himself that in bearding this particular fox in his hole he was doing a risky thing. For all that he had spoken lightly of it to Ann, he felt that the unknown element in it was not one to be disregarded. He *hoped* that William Fox would see reason; and he *hoped* that the man would be properly grateful for what had been done for him. But that he might evince neither reason nor gratitude but an ordinary human greediness was quite as likely. Indeed, it was more probable, and he did not relish the task in front of him. The affair would lack the noisy violence which he had learned to expect in dealing with Blenkiron. Mr. Fox's voice, a little high-pitched and monotonous as he remembered it, had not been the voice of Blenkiron, but of a more subtle being. The air of mystery, which surrounded the unknown man, so emphasized by the curtain, the silence of heavy carpets and the exact taste in furnishing, was still present in David's mind, and although at the time he met them first his desperate condition of body and mind had rendered him immune from the significance of these things, his recollection of them now brought that significance into his consideration of the project.

DAVID smiled a little to himself as he passed the hall porter of Graystone Chambers, for he heard the muffled midnight song of Big Ben. He had little to fear. Ann was safe, ten minutes away, waiting for him in a little hotel at the corner of Southampton Street. He was armed, the diamonds were in his waistcoat pocket, and his plan of action was cut and dried in his mind. He knew what he was going to say and how he was going to say it.

The stairs which wound round the lift shaft were thickly carpeted and he went silently up them, disdaining the lift. He told the porter he would not bother him, and in his slight conversation with the man neglected to mention which flat he was visiting.

The neat brass figures of No. 115 glimmered in the indirect light from the stairs. The double door was set back from the landing in a wide alcove with palms growing in big vases on either side. David studied the approach and wondered why the world always used palms to convey wealth. He stood and meditated for a moment, rehearsing what he would say to the butler. He had decided that he would gain the readiest admittance to Mr. Fox by purporting to be a messenger from Mr. Blenkiron.

He put out his finger to press the bell push and hesitated at a sound which reached him from the stairs. It might have been a snort or a cough. He went quickly to the end of the alcove, and without emerging into the revealing light, saw an astounding sight.

Mr. Blenkiron's square figure was turning the corner as he prepared to mount the last flight of stairs. His big head was bent downward and he did not see the startled face of his late employee. David did not wait to think; he shot back into the alcove and had inserted himself between a screen of palms and the wall by the time the financier had negotiated the stairs and appeared, a massive silhouette, at the entrance to the alcove.

David held his breath, recovering from this unexpected development and rapidly rearranging his ideas and replanning his next move. Blenkiron was now at the door, ringing the bell, and two alternatives presented themselves to the young man. Either he could go away when the financier was inside and return later to put forward his proposition to Mr. Fox, or follow at Blenkiron's heels and tell Mr, Fox the whole story while he held up the other at the point of a pistol.

The butler opened the left-hand side of the double door and the financier stepped inside, saying something to the man which was inaudible to David. The door half-closed, hiding the two men, and the butler's voice came clearly:

"Yes sir, he's still up."

David realized that the butler had not yet completely closed the door, leaped noiselessly across the space which intervened between it and him, flattened himself against the wall by its side, and proceeded to execute a daring, but as it happened, successful maneuver. He stretched out his hand holding a handkerchief and with his forefinger stuffed a corner of the material into the metal lock-hole completely filling it. The moment he removed his finger and held the rest of the handkerchief back lest it be seen from within, the butler shut the door firmly and did not notice the absence of the click which should have followed. The bolt, actuated by the spring, pressed against the handkerchief, and did no more than hold the door in its closed position. David's object was accomplished; he had merely to push it to gain entrance when the moment came.

This he awaited with impatience, giving the butler time to usher in Blenkiron and return to whatever lair he inhabited. He put his ear to the door, but could hear nothing; the wood of the panel was thick and the carpets within heavy. The light over the door went out, and plunged the alcove once more into what was to David comforting shadow, for his position at the door would have been more than suspicious to anybody passing across the landing.

HE GAVE matters a minute to adjust themselves in the flat and then pushed the door open without disturbing the silence. He removed the handkerchief which had done such good work, and before shutting the door, twisted the knob of the lock and set the spring retaining the latch so that in case of necessity he could get the door open without wasting what might be life-saving time. One never knew.

The hall was in comparative darkness and he stood for a moment endeavoring to recall the position of things from memory gained on the occasion of his passing through it four nights back. His efforts were rendered easier by the faint light which came from the transom of a door somewhere out of sight round the first corner on the left, which he judged to be the position of the kitchen.

It was the room of the curtain.

He stood with his hand on the knob for a moment, and deduced one satisfactory thing from the fact that no light showed either through the key-hole or under the door. The partners were at the far end of the room with the curtain drawn between them and the door, and only at their end were there lights.

He had but to open the door without being detected by the two men to hear what they were saying and base on their conversation his conclusions and consequent action.

He turned the knob, and pushing the door a foot ajar, put his eye round it. He sighed with mingled relief and anticipation and began to walk quietly into the room.

Suddenly he stopped and stood transfixed with incredulous amazement while the whole fabric of his pre-conceived ideas fell down like a pack of cards before a breeze.

He stared at what he saw, his lips slightly apart, his hand gripping the pistol which he had taken from his hip-pocket as he entered the room.

The curtain was transparent so long as one looked through it from the darkness into light, and that was what David was doing. Before, when he had been engaged by the unknown man, the other side of the room had been dark and this side lighted. Now it was he who was invisible, subjecting Mr. William Fox to a scrutiny similar to the one which he himself had undergone four nights ago.

It was the result of this that produced the peculiar expression on his face and the astonishing chaos in his mind.

He knew the man who sat in an armchair opposite Mr. Blenkiron and rubbed plump fingers together while his partner talked. He knew every line of his face as well as he knew the lines of his own. A small, black, fortnight-old beard which covered the man's chin was no disguise; the upper part of his face, the eyebrows, brow, and shiny bald dome of a head were unforgettable; that squat rotundity of the figure, overflowing the ample chair, was unmistakable.

Then, when the man spoke a few words, all the outward tokens of personality lost their significance by comparison; for the voice gave David greater sense of certainty, in spite of the incredibility of the whole thing, than so far had anything else.

It was no longer the high-pitched monotonous voice of William Fox, so different from Blenkiron's, but a slow, fat voice, a voice which David had never dreamt of hearing again as long as he lived—the voice of Mr. Reuben Lipsheimer, moneylender.

Reuben Lipsheimer! The man who was dead; the man who had been indubitably shot; whose death had driven Ann to attempted suicide and he himself into hunted despair; the man who alive had robbed him of his money, and dead of his sense of freedom. The man who—

"God!" said David beneath his breath.

CHAPTER XII

A RUSH of new thoughts occupied the blank in his mind which this astounding discovery had temporarily created. For a brief moment he entertained a suspicion that it was Lipsheimer's twin he was seeing beyond the curtain, but it went even as it came. So many things pointed to the fact that William Fox was indeed Lipsheimer, and Lipsheimer alive, and of them all the most striking was the explanation it offered for something that had puzzled both Ann and himself at various times. The fact that Blenkiron had possessed so complete a knowledge of their connection with the crime—the crime which had never been committed.

He remembered the girl's account of Blenkiron's behavior on the morning of the newspaper story—he had been angry, very angry, but later pleased and satisfied; in the interval between the two states of mind he had discovered that his friend was still alive, still able to finance the diamond venture. That was it. The diamond venture. Lipsheimer had for some reason faked his own murder and immediately afterward put up the money necessary to the professor's experiment. Forty thousand pounds, for radium. Forty thousand pounds—

David's mind stood still again as a great light of comprehension broke upon it.

"The pearls! *My* pearls!" ran the thoughts like a flash of fire. "My pearls paid for the diamonds!"

He put his hand to the bulge in his waistcoat pocket, and, as he felt it a sudden coolness of mind and body swept over him like a refreshing wind. He could think, and his thoughts moved along a smooth track unbroken by any obstacle. He heard what the two were saying for the first time since he had entered the room. It was as though he was a diver emerging from the silent depths of a pool into the multitudinous sounds of the air. Blenkiron's voice in the middle of an edifying sentence came to his ears.

"—so there you have it. Your precious young man with the acute moral sense has lost your diamonds for you."

The man who should have been dead considered for a moment. Then he said:

"And you say Van Loon tried to get them? I can't understand what the hell you were doing all the time." His tones were harsh, trembling on the verge of childish rage.

The financier put his hands on his knee, and said patiently:

"I've told you all there is to be told. The diamonds were made. Van Loon pinched them. I shot him and learned that he had hidden them in the top of Gould's life-preserver. In the meantime Gould had escaped, taking the dam' thing, and I chased him with a lot of trouble on account of Zack, who chose that particular moment

to raid the Mill House. We shook him off and traced the two young devils—"

"Two—?"

"Yes, I told you. He took the girl."

"I thought you said she was safe."

"She was—but—"

"But what?" Reuben Lipsheimer was scowling at his partner because there were so many unsatisfactory and suspicious aspects to his story.

"Well, she got independent, and I put her in a cellar. Gould got her out."

"How do you mean 'independent?' "

"You ought to know," retorted Mr. Blenkiron, who was resenting his partner's disbelief. "You tried her yourself—that night." His voice dropped to intentional emphasis on the last two words.

"Leave that night alone," growled the other, "and get on with it."

"Can't you hear what I say? I tell you he didn't know he had the stones, and when we caught up with him he threw the life-preserver at me when I had him cornered and the thing dropped in the river; it was pure chance. I think I know the approximate spot—and I've marked it. We may get it out. That's all. I got back to the car, changed my clothes—I had waded around—and came straight on to town. The brute got clear away."

THERE was a moment's silence in which the moneylender regarded the financier with ill-concealed fury. Suddenly he broke out:

"You crook, Blenkiron! You've got the stones yourself! You know you have! Do you expect me to believe that stupid yarn? And as to Gould; would he behave like that knowing that he was in our power because he was concerned in my murder? You're mad! My God! I'll smash you!" He moved in his chair, and the financier rose and looked down at him, furiously indignant.

"If I had the diamonds would I come *here?* You call *me* mad; you're mad yourself! Use your head. Would I come here? When I could have run for Brussels—"

He stopped, on the verge of a slip. The other caught him up quickly.

"So you *were* going to Brussels, were you? I heard Mabel was there. I see—at least I think I see. You'd got it planned. Where's Van Loon?" He shot the question like a bullet.

"Cricklade. I hit him rather badly in the arm. He wasn't fit enough to come on any further by car. It jolted him."

"I want to talk to him. Where's he staying?"

"*The White Hart,*" said Mr. Blenkiron, and he watched the other reach for the telephone on the table at his side. His attitude was a little alarmed. David understood it. The Dutchman might not tell quite the same story. Lipsheimer went on speaking while he waited for the exchange to answer his call.

"You made a mistake, Blenkiron," he said thickly, as if his emotions were greater than his control. "You were too suspicious about Van Loon in that letter of yours I got this afternoon. Too dam' suspicious. You laid it on too thick to be natural. You as good as told me that the diamonds were goin' to be stolen and that Van Loon would do the stealin'—that you refused to accept responsibility.

"You fool! Don't you see that if a man is as suspicious as all that in a job like that he doesn't write letters about it? He *acts!* If you'd really believed what you said you'd have shot Van Loon dead and dropped him in one of those cellars you're so proud of— Hullo! Exchange? Give me Cricklade, please. Yes—ring me up—" He hung up the receiver and added: "As a matter of fact I know Van Loon was going to steal them."

"What!"

"Yes. D'you think I trusted you? He was instructed to look after them if you showed any signs of double-crossing me. You did. I'll bet you did, and he moved accordin' to orders."

The financier did not answer. His eyes were open and he glanced at the telephone nervously. His hand moved furtively down his side.

"Drop it!" snapped the moneylender. "You're covered from this pocket! I shot James this way, and I'd as easy shoot you."

David started. James? Where did the connection occur? He remembered the name somewhere, but where? He racked his brains, and continued to watch the two beyond the curtain with a concentrated eagerness such as he had never known. The world was rebuilding itself for Ann and himself in a conversation. He had the moral issue clear in his mind.

A silence fell while the partners waited

for the telephone to ring. David searched his memory for the name of James. He tried to visualize it written or printed, and failed. Then, suddenly, it came to him. James was the name by which the valet-butler at Lipsheimer's Half Moon Street establishment had been known. It was this man's evidence he had suspected of being all-important from the police point of view since the papers had made no mention of him. Both Ann and himself had been seen by him in Reuben Lipsheimer's room that night, but he had seen neither of them depart. Ann had run out of the flat at midnight and he himself had left it at two in the morning; times when the man would be in bed.

As David reached this point in his mental discussion the moneylender took the pistol out of his pocket in response to a suspicious movement from Blenkiron, and David, noticing the weapon with interest, received the last connecting link in the chain of new facts he had learnt. The pistol was a .25 automatic, and it was a .25 caliber bullet which had been found in the brain of the dead man. Lipsheimer had shot his valet from the pocket with that weapon, dressed him in his clothes—the man was not unlike his master, loaded him with his own identity, cleared the safe which included the pearls, of its contents, and leaving the rest to the police had come to live behind the curtain in Graystone Chambers until the forty thousand he had got for the pearls paid its dividend in diamonds.

The plot was no longer mysterious, although David had still to learn Lipsheimer's motive for killing the man James and whether the police had discovered the error of their first announcement. It seemed not unlikely, in which case the moneylender would be a hunted man.

SUDDENLY the telephone bell rang, and Lipsheimer removed the receiver with his left hand without taking the instrument from the table. His right hand held the pistol. Mr. Blenkiron had recovered from his momentary alarm and was now sitting back comfortably. He was in the right; the story he had told was in effect true even if it lacked fulness of detail, and the Dutchman would verify the loss of the diamonds, which was the chief point as far as practical politics were concerned.

The people at *The White Hart* had to fetch Van Loon from his bed, and during the period of waiting silence claimed the two men. At last Lipsheimer spoke into the mouthpiece without taking his eyes from Mr. Blenkiron or shifting the hand in which he held the pistol.

"Hullo? Fox speaking. Blenkiron is here—" He broke off and listened to an explosive speech at the other end. Then he went on:

"Yes. He came straight up. Listen. What happened to the stones?"

The Dutchman apparently told the story from his point of view, and the moneylender listened, nodding his head at intervals. At the end of it he said:

"You're certain of your men's corroboration? They saw it happen? They did *not?* Oh! He was in the river—well it sounds convincing, I suppose. When can you come up? What? But isn't that rather a high horse to ride? All right. Have it your own way. Good-by."

He replaced the receiver.

"Benefit of the doubt for you, my friend. That's all. But it seems that if it hadn't been for Gould you'd have got away with the stones. Van Loon says he's never coming near us again. He's small loss. Now let us consider. Massaroon's still at the Mill House?"

"No. I don't know where he is. He'd disappeared by the time I had eluded Zack."

"Disappeared? The hell he had. And how did you elude Zack?"

"By my superior knowledge of local topography. He tried to come into the house by the passage just after I had got out of the ropes that cub Gould put me in. I heard him coming and locked the bookcase door. Massaroon was helping Van Loon to get up—he was returning to consciousness and babbling about his life-preserver, which I knew Gould had got. He had hit me over the head with it. Van Loon and I got into a secret cupboard in the study—we were neither of us in a condition to put up a fight, groggy and unarmed, for Gould had decamped with all the firearms—"

"That young devil seems to have had it all his own way!" growled the moneylender. "I'll get him!"

"Well, while Zack burst through the bookshelf, we sat in a cupboard. There hadn't been room for three of us in it, and Massaroon had left the room for some

destination unknown. We gave things an hour to settle themselves and when we came out Zack had gone and so had the professor, perhaps together."

"With my forty thousand pounds' worth of radium!"

Blenkiron shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose so."

"Well. There's one more thing before we decide what we're to do next. Could Massaroon repeat the process?"

The other thought for a while before answering. Then he said:

"I told you how the affair went. It was sheer luck he didn't burn the place up and us with it. I doubt if he could, or would, do it again. He doesn't give a damn for money, that's the difficult part of it. All he thinks about is his rays and the benefit he's going to confer on humanity with them. No; I think we'd better concentrate on getting that weapon out of the river."

"*We?* You forget the unfortunate death of James. I can't dash about the country," remarked the moneylender. "Oh! You very dam' fool! You've messed this game up like a child of three! I could shoot you where you sit!"

Blenkiron spread his fat hands.

"And then you'd destroy every chance of recovering your diamonds. *I* know where they are—you forget that."

The moneylender sneered.

"How do you know they're still in that club? Gould had it for eighteen hours or more. Suppose he took the head off for some reason?"

"Why should he?"

"Why shouldn't he? But what is much more to the point—why did he throw the thing at you? Why did he land at all after sinking your boat? He could have got straight away by the canoe without that elaborate maneuver on the bank. Tell me! Why did he do that? Use your imagination!"

The white eyes opened.

"You mean—"

"I mean I know Gould. I spent several weeks dealing with a very determined young man who had the exaggerated notion that I ought to hand him over a pearl necklace worth a cool forty thousand just because it happened to be his. And when he realized that I wasn't such a fool he decided to kill me, and he would have done it, too, if I hadn't drawn a gun on him first and ordered him out of the place."

"Oh! So that was it. I wondered what he was after you for."

"Yes. And as a result I know him. He's honest, and all that, but he's alive in the head, all right. In fact when you brought him in that night I had half a mind to have you put him back on his bench. It was only the fact that I had the drop on him because of the murder and that he didn't know who I was that overruled my doubts about the wisdom of employin' him. It made him safe, you see, like the girl. But he's clever."

"But I can't believe he fooled me like that," objected Blenkiron.

"You're like anybody else," said Lipsheimer bitterly. "You believe what you want to believe. For God's sake shut your eyes. They're dam' unpleasant."

IT WAS here that David realized that there was nothing more to be learned from a futile argument which would continue indefinitely with merely increasing abuse to enliven its trend. He wanted to get back to the hotel on the corner of Southampton Street and tell Ann a great many things of vast importance.

He watched the two men beyond the curtain for a moment longer and then resisting the desire to bid them good night, tiptoed to the door and out into the corridor. He closed the door softly and went quietly into the sitting-room opposite; the room into which he had been taken with Blenkiron the first night while they waited for an interview. He shut the door, switched on the light, and seating himself at a small writing table, took from the rack a sheet of notepaper stamped with the address and wrote swiftly:

Dear Mr. Lipsheimer:

I would like to take this opportunity of thanking you for the kindness and sagacity you have displayed in the matter of investing my capital. The return on the sum of £40,000 has so far exceeded my most sanguine expectations that I regret the circumstances which render a personal expression of my gratitude inadvisable. At the same time I would compliment you on your choice of an executive partner and suggest that you place in his hands the details of the journey I am sure you will see the necessity of making. He would escort you to Brussels, perhaps, or some city equally salubrious, for of late I must admit that I have feared for your health; knowing that the death of the man James, which at the moment is of such concern to the authorities, may result in more unfortunate things than the mere growing of a beard and the erection of an ingenious curtain.

Thanking you again, I would remain,

Yours sincerely, DAVID SHAW GOULD.

He folded this epistle neatly, and sealing it in an envelope which he addressed to "William Fox, Esqre.", he switched off the light and made his way to the front door. The murmur of argument still proceeded from the room where the partners were in committee and the light over the kitchen door still showed when a moment later he let himself out of the flat and closing the door, flicked the letter into the box. He rang the bell at the side, and then, without waiting, ran lightly down the stairs, smiling happily as he went.

He had but to lift his hand to feel the bulge made in his waistcoat pocket by the diamonds. They were his diamonds by every moral right in the world.

THEY sat, a party of four, at Ketner's and the small bronzed man with the bright eyes was the host. Mr. Zack was enjoying himself. Ann was on his right, David on his left, and Professor Massaroon opposite, smoking a cigaret in the interval between soup and entrée. He boasted a new velvet dinner-jacket, on which however, there were already signs of cigaret ash.

The girl wore a frock of liberty gold which set off the red lights in her brown hair to perfection. The soft, luminous skin of her face was a little flushed, for she, too, was enjoying herself. It had been a day of days, beginning early in the morning with a shopping expedition such as came to one only in dreams and ending with this dinner with Mr. Zack. Ketner's had given up its best under his quietly insistent demands for it.

David was sitting with his clasped hands resting on the edge of the table, listening to the Rhodesian. Mr. Zack had bought the diamonds from him for ninety-eight thousand pounds—an expert's valuation—and that money, minus a comparatively microscopic sum which had gone to restock Ann's wardrobe, lay in the bank in his name. He was now as rich as Crœsus, or as nearly as rich as that king as his smaller needs required. He had talked investments with Mr. Zack's stock-brokers most of the morning, and they had assured him of an income of at least eight thousand a year. He was already acquiring the poise of a man of wealth.

Mr. Zack was talking about an experimental laboratory, and the professor watched him like a fascinated bird.

"I suggest that we build it from the foundations up with our object in view all the time. Most of your work, Professor, will be the extension and application of the heat rays and from what I saw when I was in the Mill House and what you told me, I gather that they have peculiar habits."

"But think of the cost," said the professor. "I mean that the money could be spent better in the work. What do I want with a building?"

Mr. Zack sighed.

"You're an impractical fellow, Massaroon. I've told you that there is half a million for the institute—as a beginning. And I know eighty-three millionaires who are going to follow my lead because I say so. You've got all the money in the world."

"I can't believe it," said the professor unhappily.

"You will in time. There are four architects having lunch with us tomorrow. Roberts is very sick because you turned him down again, by the way. His knee is a little better, and his mind is as active and speculative as ever."

"I make no more diamonds!" snapped the professor with a loudness which startled the room.

"I know, I know!" the little man soothed him. "I can understand your feelings."

"Huh," muttered the professor, and, with a suddenly preoccupied air took a stub of pencil from his pocket and started to write complicated formulæ on the tablecloth.

The others turned to other affairs; David's proposed purchase of his old home at Maidenhead, and the flight of Reuben Lipsheimer and Blenkiron. Discreet enquiries at Greystone Chambers had satisfied Mr. Zack that those two gentlemen had indeed taken the only possible course left open to them. Sudden business had called them abroad.

"Poor Percy," observed Mr. Zack. "He's about the unluckiest bandit in the world. I shall meet him again, I expect, sometime or other. I look forward to it, for now we have an even greater store of mutual memories to provide us with repartee."

"The thing that puzzles me is why Lipsheimer killed James," said David. "I wonder if the police know."

"You can always ask them, but I don't suppose they do. Your money-lending friend may have had some hold over the chap, and he kicked, same as you did, and

got into trouble, or, of course, it may have been a deliberate act of Lipsheimer's—maybe you frightened him, and he, needing your pearls and to be left in peace, faked the whole thing so as to disappear as completely as a man can, which is by being dead, publicly dead that is. It's been done before."

"Perhaps I'll find out, one day."

"Or perhaps you won't. There are more unsolved murder mysteries in the year than most people realize. I think we'd better have Mum, *cordon rouge*, nineteen eleven." Mr. Zack studied the champagne list. "I feel I must celebrate my acquisition of the Massaroon diamond collection. That reminds me. I had an odd notion this morning; I'm having a set of trouser buttons made of those stones."

"Trouser buttons!" exclaimed Ann.

"M'm yes. The conventional design of course, but they are to be detachable so that I can wear 'em whenever I feel like it. Platinum settings. Very handsome."

The girl laughed softly, and Mr. Zack looked a little aggrieved.

"Nobody could accuse me of being ostentatious," he said.

Ann reassured him.

"It isn't that. I was thinking of Mr. Blenkiron's face when he hears about them."

The little man brightened swiftly, and patted her hand.

"You're sharp, my dear," he said. "As a matter of fact that is exactly what put the idea into my head."

Then the champagne arrived.

It was perhaps two hours later that a man and a girl got out of a taxi by Waterloo Bridge and walked slowly arm in arm to the bench which they both knew. They sat down on it, and the girl opened her white opera cloak so that she might be free of its collar in order to rest her head more comfortably on the young man's shoulder.

Across the pavement and below the parapet the water flowed slowly, the still lights of the opposite bank and the bridges, trembling in their reflections on its smooth black surface. The moon hung low in the Southern sky, and the warehouses on Southwark side were silhouetted in dark masses against the pale indigo of the night sky.

The river sucked and gurgled at the stone buttresses, and pursued its quiet course, as uneventful a stream as ever made its way to the sea.

THE END

ARED WHITE *describes*

Sergeant Brunner's Second Adventure in

Mlle. Belgique

SINCE the élite of Euzivan's gallant sons of Sam Browne held themselves in an attitude of readiness to cast themselves abjectly at mademoiselle's feet; since every one from the bald, florid and thick-waisted Signal Corps major from Toul to the array of handsome, dashing flight lieutenants from Colombes-les-Belles, maneuvered adroitly and openly for her favor; since even the town major and M. P. captain looked upon her with tender eyes, it seemed an ironical, unfathomable whim of the realm feminine that Mlle. Belgique should reserve her attentions and affections for the dull, prosaic, even unappreciative non-combatant, Sergeant Brunner.

Mlle. Belgique—the name they gave her because she was of Belgian antecedents—was a coveted bit of sunshine in the forsaken countrysides of the advance section of the services of supply in that area north of Neufchateau where the S O S dovetailed into the First Army area immediately in rear of the zone of conflict. Mademoiselle was perhaps twenty, which was on the borderland of the passés as such matters were reckoned in la belle France. In one of the larger cities she must have caused little or no commotion among the olive-drabbed gallants from across the seas whose tender advances far behind the lines were as irresistible as their more savage and purposeful advances up where the powder was carried in cartridge shells rather than tinseled vanity cases.

In Paris, notwithstanding her vivacious air, her piquant face with its large expressive black eyes and the delicately turned, full red mouth set in a delectable oval of olive and white, must have met the competition of a multitude of towering beauties. Beauties that trooped in companies, regiments, brigades. Who saw it to be their great duty to bring a touch of coquettish gaiety into the sordid lives of those war-wearied lieutenants, captains and colonels of the boulevard shock troops in that unrelenting typewriter barrage with which Paris fairly rang throughout the war.

But here in Euzivan, where the peasantry, be they fair or plain, worked with their hands in the fields; wore cambric that lacked the witchery of Parisian needles; encased their feet in huge wooden shoes that reeked of the soil—here Mlle. Belgique shone resplendent as a rose. Small wonder

the susceptible came from far and near within the area to feast their souls and pay her homage.

THE antique major from Toul, patently depending upon the magnet of exalted rank to fill in his hiatus in hair and plethora of waist, threw into the contest tins of priceless American chocolates from the commissary when he saw that his golden oak leaves had failed him.

A gay flight lieutenant from Colombes-les-Belles, who had considered himself irresistible, added the reckless lure of a ride over the lines in his plane.

"*Defendu!*" smiled Mlle. Belgique with a shrug of her pretty shoulders, refusing to be party to such a riotous breach of Army orders.

Mademoiselle would sit with them at the stupid little Café Côte d'Or in the village of Euzivan, sipping vermuth cassise which the florid major from Toul invariably ordered, or champagne of select vintage which was the only drink that suited the lieutenants from Colombes-les-Belles. She would talk of herself, of them, exchange gay badinage, boast of the gallant *Americaines*, propose fervent toasts to les Allies—but her personal interest was fixed with unswerving constancy upon the ungainly Sergeant Brunner. And that favored non-com., oddly enough, seemed to show as little interest in Mademoiselle as she, in turn, bestowed upon the bald-headed Signal Corps major from Toul.

Her name was Yvonne—Yvonne de Milont Montrielle—and she gave to each of them her card and a course of instruction in pronouncing her name. But the name was impossible and Mlle. Belgique she remained. Her personal story was full of pathos. Father, brothers, uncles—all who were near and dear to her had been killed by the *boche peeg*. So she had come lately to Euzivan to live with her grandaunt, a gnarled old croonie who waddled about in heavy wooden shoes eking out a bare existence with a few milch cows and a drove of pigs that shared with her the ramshackle stone house at the western edge of Euzivan, a kilometer or so from the radio intercept station where the favored Sergeant Brunner was fighting the war with wireless waves. A cruel environ for a lady, there among the cows and pigs, and yet the war had worked stranger and more cruel pranks upon genteel folk.

But, except for the silent old spinster of a grandaunt, mademoiselle was alone in the world now, she wept, thanks to this terrib-l-l-lle *guerre!* Oh, how she loathed herself that she were not a man—a strong man who could take a gun and shoot, shoot, shoot those terrib-l-l-lle *boche peeg*. But thanks to these brave *Americaines* the war would soon end, France would be saved, and life would be gay once more!

WHEN some one in the widening circle that came to the hitherto deserted Café Côte d'Or, sought to slip an arm about her waist or advance his suit under the guise of playfulness, she would master him instantly by raising a cautioning hand.

"But you *Americaines* are so polite—such gentlemen—and you—you are an American gentleman!" she would expound in her broken English.

The defence was perfect.

"But we are amateurs, mere clumsy gawks at the game of politeness," a persistent lieutenant from Columbes-les-Belles once retorted.

There was an echoing chorus of approval. Had the lieutenant not found the flaw in her defence. Was it not true that the French are the consummate masters of the art of politeness!

"But no, you do yourself great injustice," she retorted. "The French they are polite with their mouths—with their manners. The American, he is polite with his heart. He is big, generous. He does not bow to a lady very, very low and then perhaps smite her in the face with his hand when he is angry or jealous. Politeness it is not mere show. It is a thing of the heart. It is the American who is the polite, true gentleman. *Voilà!*"

The lieutenant subsided. "You win, Frenchy," he told her with resignation.

It was not the less mystifying that if she kept these ardent gallants at arm's length with an adroit and delightful poise, she abandoned her reserve entirely when it came to Sergeant Brunner. There were those who said she fairly threw herself at that backward gawk. Brunner never visited the Café Côte d'Or, but mademoiselle had a habit of tripping out and meeting him, as if quite casually and by chance, as he was on his way to and from his mess in the village—the only place he was known to

go except in his motorcyle sidecar on official business.

"Can't see what she sees in that bird—unless she thinks he's quite harmless amusement," complained a flight lieutenant.

"There's no figuring out the tastes of wimmin," responded the major from Tours dismally. "Perhaps if he showed a lively interest in her, she'd drop him on the spot. They're an arbitrary batch of jades, these French-Belgiques."

"In one breath she rages because she ain't a man so she can shoot-shoot-shoot '*ze boche peeg*' and the next minute she goes gallivantin' after that round shouldered, thin chested non-combatant," muttered an observer lieutenant.

But the darts of envy and ridicule did not damage Sergeant Brunner's cause with Mlle. Belgique. They caricatured him and satirized him, even mimicked his shambling gait and distracted, impersonal expression of face. Mademoiselle merely would shrug her shoulders and toss her head contemptuously.

"I have heard that he has been within the enemy lines in his work for the radio," she challenged them one day.

THEY laughed in unison. Private Smith who drove the sergeant about in a sidecar from one intercept station to another had put out such a rumor as that. But Brunner himself had nailed it. Something strange about that, too. Brunner was the most docile and inoffensive of little non-combatants. But he had snapped into a rage one day when he heard Private Smith telling the story at mess and had leaped upon the private, raining a succession of blows upon his face. A lamb attacking a bulldog could not have presented a more unexpected scene. Private Smith had taken the sergeant promptly by the collar and shaken him, but Brunner raged and stormed until he was almost in hysterics and threatened him with every manner of calamity if he ever repeated the story again. The private finally retracted his story and the two resumed their peaceful relations quite as if nothing had happened.

"Queer chap," Private Smith had told the mess. "Can't figure 'im out at all. I was tryin' to do 'im a favor. He got some valuable dope over that radio from the Germans just before St. Mihiel. He's daffy about the radio. That's all he eats and sleeps. I got it straight that he went over right into the German lines and got their code away from a squarehead Heinie operator. They'd give 'im the Croix de Guerre for that—or maybe the Congressional Medal. But no, he insists he got it off the radio—seems to think that radio is a little tin god and ought to have all the glory—an' he got one of them little brass Agricole Medals, or whatever you call 'em, for peacetime service just because some S O S lieutenant colonel who got a Croix de Guerre—maybe by trading a package of cigarets for it—said Brunner wasn't a fightin' man and wasn't entitled to it. And now he wants to commit murder every time I bring up the subject, says it might hurt the radio game."

The story had gotten about but found small credence. It wasn't human to decline such honors. The exploit of going into the German lines was simply a vacant rumor in a land of vivid rumors, a product of Private Smith's imagination, or of the imagination of a German lieutenant prisoner who told Smith the story. Brunner was simply a non-combatant—a radio fanatic who'd probably come into the army in the first place without any thought of doing a man's part. He was small enough, runt enough, to be in the infantry, tote a gun and ram a bayonet. Most of those behind-the-front malingerers were huge fellows with broad shoulders and the faces of Greek gods. Locate a dovecote or a pigeon loft, a quartermaster warehouse or an ordnance repair shop and you'd find them manned by physical giants; great strapping fellows capable of ramming a bayonet knife through two Germans at one thrust if once you could get a bayonet into their hands at the front. The flight lieutenant from Colombes-les-Belles offered this observation at the Café Côte d'Or as an indication that there might be some truth after all in the story of Brunner's mad exploit. It fell flat. Brunner was a hopeless non-combatant. The verdict was sealed. He didn't even have gumption enough to show a proper appreciation of the attentions of Mlle. Belgique, they averred.

BUT mademoiselle was of a different mind. Moreover she was as skilful in the offensive as in defensive strategy. When Sergeant Brunner gave no evidence of succumbing to her charms of his own volition, she took the matter into her

own hands. She talked to him of himself. No result. Personal flattery, most potent of weapons, failed. She spoke of his work, his radio. He flared interest at once. He explained and expounded its intricacies, its possibilities. He spent a whole evening unfolding his dream of the future of the elusive sound waves. It was an expansive dream of days to come when men would talk to one another across the seas; when a 'celloist or a singer would waft his art in all its subtle tones from some sending tower to hundreds of thousands of listeners scattered over hundreds of miles. This war was merely a nursemaid to the great infant radio. It was helping it to toddle. Peace would bring to the radio its great triumphs. It would become one of the great industries.

From this point of vantage, this community of interest, mademoiselle began struggling for a more personal hold.

"You will have a part in that great work —in America *apres le guerre?*" she asked him one evening as she led him on a long detour of several kilometers from the intercept station to his billet.

"I intend to spend my whole life in radio work," he replied.

"I should like to help you—in America," she cooed suggestively.

There was no reply.

"Why you not like me?" she demanded plaintively, stopping suddenly close before him.

Sergeant Brunner squirmed uneasily, turned his face away and suppressed an impulse to turn and run. Women always had been an enigma to him. He had given all his interest and devotion to his work, living within himself, and giving little if any thought to girls. They had puzzled him at school and seemed to avoid him afterward. He faced a situation now with which he was unable to cope.

"I—I—like you well enough, I guess," he blustered awkwardly.

She slipped her arms about his neck with a sudden movement and kissed him.

"*Je vous aime*—I love you—I shall leave you never," she whispered.

Brunner's brain reeled. A sudden, unexpected, unwonted impulse moved him as it did that day he assaulted Private Smith. He took her in his arms and returned her kisses fervently.

"I don't want you to ever leave me," he said thickly.

THEREAFTER the intercept station at Euzivan did not resound to the echo of his footsteps at any and all hours of the day and night. Mlle. Belgique—Yvonne he called her—began to claim some of his attention. It was no longer a purely one-sided affair of the heart. With the wiles of coquetry known only to French mastery in such affaires, Yvonne intrenched herself deeply in Sergeant Brunner's affections. To him she became a real passion. It was no idle affair of the moment. To him this was no transient overseas flirtation of the kind that raged in rear of the lines wherever there were soldiers and mademoiselles throughout the reaches of France and Belgium—and later the Rhinelands. He soon found himself dreaming of the day when she could return to America with him and he found himself unhappy on those days when he did not catch a glimpse of her.

And while she sat through the afternoon with the group of officers that now made a practice of drifting in and out of the Café Côte d'Or and sipped champagne and vermuth cassisse with them, even an occasional glass of cognac or eau de vie, she continued to hold them at arm's length, remaining at the café only when she found the security of numbers. Her evenings were reserved for Sergeant Brunner whenever he did not have to do night vigil at the intercept station.

"Come on, tell us—when are you going to get tired of that gawk sergeant and enjoy a little real life with us," the persistent flight-lieutenant bantered her one afternoon.

"I cannot love many of you—he is but one," she laughed.

"Well, I reckon you can have your pick of us—just point out the one you want and the rest of us are gentlemen enough to disappear. You yourself boast what fine gentlemen *les Americaines* all are."

"It would be impossible to select from so many handsome *Americaines*," she parried gaily.

"Put yourself up for raffle and go to the highest bidder, then—I'll start it off at a thousand francs. You couldn't lose since you say we're all so desirable."

"But my heart is gone—you would be cheated even for one franc," she replied more seriously.

"That gawk sergeant hasn't brains enough to fall for you—his kind is one of

the mademoiselles that wears wooden shoes," put in the bald-headed major.

"Ah, *mai mon!* He has what you call fallen. He is serious—not a flirt—he will take me to America with him."

The half-dozen officers exchanged glances of mutual understanding at this bit of information.

"So that's the big idea," exclaimed the major. "He's playing the serious game is he? Say there aren't enough ships afloat to carry all the French girls home that fall for that line of bunk, and there ain't army enough in France to protect 'em from the American wives if they all did get to the United States."

"But there is no Madam Brunner—and there will not be until I take that name, *mon ami*," she said with assurance.

"Nice long time to wait, I'll say," averred the lieutenant. "And say, a nice live time you'd have in America as Mrs. Brunner. I don't know where you were brought up, or how, but you do seem to crave your share of company and attention and likker or you wouldn't be down here at this café every afternoon. Did you know America was dry?"

Mlle. Belgique merely shrugged her shoulders disdainfully as an indication that she was proof against the darts that were hidden in their badinage.

"I know now why she prefers that noncombatant," asserted the aviator, a tinge of light sarcasm in his voice. "She figures that he'll be sure to survive the war with two good legs and arms."

"I do not see you engaging in daily fight with the *boche peeg*," Mlle. Belgique shot back with a taunting accent.

"Well if you're around tomorrow night at Colombes-les-Belles when our squadrons take off for—"

"Shut up!" broke in the florid major savagely.

The lieutenant looked at him sharply, his indignation mounting rapidly at this gratuitous affront in the course of an off-duty social interchange. The major's eyes met his coolly and with no hint of apology. The lieutenant boiled inwardly, holding himself in his seat by an effort. The intimidation of gold oak leaves was barely sufficient to tide him over such an affront. The major's mood broke suddenly.

"No offense intended," he smiled. "I was only trying in my crude way to head you off from breaking your orders against talking too much socially about things official. I'll buy the champagne this time."

He arose to propose a toast.

"To Belgique," he laughed. "Here's betting that one of us wins you away from the gawk sergeant yet—and here's another one that I'll be the lucky man."

"But you could nevair take me to America," Mlle. Belgique accused him. "Your wife—she might object."

"Well I'll admit that she might be just a bit unreasonable," the major confessed draining his glass. "American wives are a bit peculiar that way, you know."

OVER at the intercept station near the outer edge of Euzivan Sergeant Brunner found himself with less and less time to devote to Yvonne. The glorified rear guard action known as the battle of St. Mihiel had passed into history, and the millions of tons of artillery and the heavy masses of infantry were being moved covertly into place for the opening phases of the red Argonne. The air must be searched during every moment of day and night for enemy radio messages; and these must be decoded. Brunner's proficiency in German, and his success in breaking down an unbreakable German code phrase prior to the St. Mihiel operations, put his services in strong demand. There were new American code sheets to be compiled too and frequently Brunner was assigned to fill in at this task.

He was particularly valuable in devising new code signals for use among the American radio communications' nets for he had a knack of choosing German and obscure French provincial words and letter combinations. His code contributions were not perfunctory or readily to be broken down by German intelligence officers as had been those earlier American codes which had used numerals for local convenience. If *Daniel* was the code word for a division and *Daniel*—1 indicated the division commander, *Daniel*—2 the chief of staff and each staff officer thereafter had a number attached to the division code word *Daniel* it took little German ingenuity to guess that a code word with the numeral 12 attached indicated a division, that one with 7 indicated a regiment, one with 30 or 40 a corps. It was mere child's play to break such a code. The Americans might as well have

sent all their messages and orders in the clear.

As each hour and day for the Argonne approached, the demand for new and less transparent codes and the work of breaking down German code messages became unrelenting. Even the best of codes had a habit of falling into the hands of the enemy and had to be replaced instantly. Otherwise the high command might just as well furnish the Hindenburg headquarters with a true advance copy of its battle orders.

In this work Sergeant Brunner worked unceasingly and from Yvonne he received valuable assistance. Her ready imagination had grasped the needs of the code tables and her knowledge of provincial French, Belgian and German dialects was of valuable assistance. She would work evenings, secretly, in the ramshackle stone hut of the old croonie, her aunt, deciphering messages and working up new code signals.

"How wonderful that at last I can be of help!" she told the sergeant exultantly. "I have longed to be a man and shoot-shoot-shoot the *boche peeg;* but maybe my work now will be better than a hundred rifles or a thousand. *Vive la belle France. Vive les Allies!* It is beautiful to help!"

SERGEANT BRUNNER felt a thrill of satisfaction. The knowledge that she was occupied in helping him brought them closer together through those long September nights when, too often, he had time barely to go and come quickly from his meals, and must needs catch what sleep he could on the cement floor of his station. Then too, the work gave her occupation; for Brunner was mildly conscious and fretful of the fierce competition that raged of afternoons among the sons of Sam Browne down at the Café Côte d'Or.

"I say Brunner," what on earth's the idea a losin' your head over that little Frenchy flossie," old Sergeant Major Boles of the Wireless Intelligence section of the British Army demanded suddenly one night.

It was unlike old Sergeant Boles to say such a thing. He was a silent, war-broken hulk of an old man, who had been loaned to the Americans by the British Wireless Intelligence Section to help with the new intercept stations. He had been going from station to station for three months now, making his longest stops with Sergeant Brunner whose boundless enthusiasm and faith in radio communications had won his admiration and friendship completely. Tonight the silent old sergeant's breath reeked of cognac and he was alternately uncommunicative and garrulous.

Sergeant Brunner flushed, then stiffened angrily. He made no reply. At the moment he had been listening in on the powerful buzzer of the great German sending station at Nauen talking with its submarines at sea in a mysterious code language that had never changed during the war.

"I'm working again on that Nauen code," he said thickly by way of changing the subject and parrying the thrust of this friend.

"Just as well save yourself the time," Sergeant Boles rejoined.

"I think I've got one key to it but maybe that code is unbreakable and we'll never get it."

Sergeant Boles laughed derisively.

"You Americans may never get it but say," he exclaimed noisily, "the British have had that code for the last two years. They understand everything the Kaiser says to his subs. It was us picked up that message to Mexico askin' them to keep the United States mixed up in a scrap. We gave it to your Government. Your blarsted Intelligence Service has been braggin' ever since about uncoverin' the bloody plot—and we can't say a word without tippin' the Kaiser off that we've got his pet code. Hah! London has them messages from Nauen decoded before the thick-heads on the subs figure 'em out—"

The old sergeant stopped suddenly. "I'm talking too much," he rambled. "You just forget what I said Brunnie, unless you want to mess up the whole war. I'm not supposed to know that. I'm a blubberin' old fool tonight. That cognac got under my hide."

The two fell into silence. The British veteran poked up the fire in the little coal stove and fell into blank reverie. Sergeant Brunner dropped the mysterious Nauen messages that hurtled the Kaiser's will to reeking submarines a thousand miles away and foreign possessions half way around the world. He searched the air for messages from the German Army groups, corps and divisions. The air was abnormally vacant tonight. Only an occasional message was picked up.

"I'M GOING to be married to that lady," he blurted out suddenly. The old sergeant's remarks upon his fiancée still rankled in his breast. He felt it only just to Yvonne that Boles should know the truth.

"Married!" exclaimed the British noncom. incredulously. "Man are you crazy? It's against orders, ain't it, to get married in war time in your army?"

"We're waiting until the war is over then. I'm taking her to America with me," Brunner responded quietly.

"Man—that's a long time. Keep your fancy free, take it from me, and don't marry one o' them frog girls. They're a queer lot, my word for it—unless you know all about 'em from the cradle up—and what do you know about this fine flossie?"

"She's not French, she's Belgian—and a nice girl."

"Belgian!" Boles half sneered. "That's worse—or just as bad. Say, never take one of 'em on her looks. I've seen 'em as looks like Madonnas or Easter lillies outside but inside they was—"

"Yvonne is different—she's fine—she's simply wonderful," Brunner interrupted passionately.

"You talk like a lovesick loon—you infant in arms!"

"I know what I'm doing well enough—and you may be a good radio sergeant all right, but you don't understand—you don't know Yvonne."

"Don't know, upon my word," Sergeant Boles scoffed. "But don't I know that simperin' heart sickness ain't got no blarsted place at the front among fightin' men. You a boastin' to be a good radio man and fallin' in love with a French jade. First thing you'll be figuring that the Kaiser is sending love-letters to his foreign inamoratas and every code word will translate into 'Honey' or 'Duckie'. Trash. Bah!"

"Ah you talk like an old sourball that's been turned down."

"Turned down, you say. It's because I'm a man what keeps 'is 'ead. Love! Why it's dangerous even among the animals at the front. What did I see at the battle of Loos. Let me tell you. Our brave lads was in the town and had been drivin' the Jerries out. The artillery didn't lift its barrage that lovely September mornin'. It was poundin' our own men to pieces—our own artillery was. The telephone was out, the runners all got killed. It was red and awful with men dyin' all around from our own artillery, I tell you. Then love—this bloody romantic love you mush about, steps in and takes another five hundred lads. Billin' and cooin' did it—kept our artillery right hammerin' on our own poor lads!"

Sergeant Boles got up and paced the floor agitated by the red picture that flooded back into his memory of the gory affair at Loos.

"I—I don't see it," Brunner protested, big eyed and gasping at the crimson picture.

"Well, it's all plain enough. What the hell did they do but depend on them bloody pigeons to carry the word back to the artillery to lift its shells," Sergeant Boles went on hotly. "And the poor fool that 'ad filled the pigeon cage for the infantry, what had he done but put in a he pigeon and a she pigeon? Our poor lads watched 'em fly away to carry the word and what does them blarsted lovesick birds do but fly to a tree behind the murderin' barrage and sit there like a couple o' human bein's a billin' and a cooin' while the artillery crushed and mangled our lads by the score. Heaven knows how many bright lads would 'a' been ground to pieces if I 'adn't crawled to my radio and sent the signal back to stop it."

He began picking up his effects from the dark corner behind the stove and packing them in his ditty bag.

"An' heaven knows what'll go wrong here if you go billin' and cooin' around with that Belgique jade when you ought to be givin' every thought you got, you blarsted simperin' infant, into your radio. I'm tellin' you this love business ain't got no place at the front. Wimmin is even worse 'n pigeons. It can't bring nothing but bleedin' red disarster."

The British sergeant, jerking his bag over his shoulder, stamped out of the station and slammed the door behind him in disgust, muttering that he would not stay where such blighted tomfoolery might get him into an ultimate altercation with this lovelorn sapling.

OF AFTERNOONS, down at the Café Côte d'Or there were no indications that the jaunty American sons of Sam Browne shared the British sergeant's bitter philosophy in the slightest measure. They continued to hold forth—small groups from Colombes-les-Belles who motored over when they were not required for flying, the

local lieutenant who held the imposing title of town major as well as the village record of cognac consumption, the M. P. captain for that locality and the bald, florid major from Toul.

Interest in Mlle. Belgique was coming to be shared by the abandoned capers of the thick-waisted major who seemed to have cast discretion to the wind. He had dropped his vermuth cassise pernuriousness now, and bought champagne with an open handedness equal to that of the most carefree aviator from Colombes-les-Belles. He brought tins of chocolate caramels from the commissary and gave them openly to mademoiselle. He pressed his suit at every chance opportunity, fairly grovelling at Belgique's feet.

"There's no fool quite like an old fool," the town major muttered.

"They'll be slippin' that bird down to Blois and snakin' his Sam Browne off his back," the M. P. captain predicted. "He's getting to be disgusting. What he needs is a two weeks' leave in Paris and then maybe he'd go back to work for a while."

"They tell me he's got a wife and five kids back in the United States," said the town major.

"There's a lot o' wives 'd get a shock if they knew the true meanin' of the term 'gallantry in France'," laughed an aviator. "You're hard on the major—he's merely one of the most gallant of the gallant."

So the bald-headed major from Toul came to be a part of the daily picture at the Café Côte d'Or in a sector where life was prosaic and a few hours at the café was real surcease from grinding monotony.

THE major simply was not to be put aside nor discouraged. Officers wondered that he could neglect his duties at Toul in such a shameless manner and escape a court. He came daily in his large military car with the red and blue army colors on the windshield, leaving the driver seated at the wheel under an elm tree a few meters from the café. He seemed to have forgotten that he had any military duties to perform. Doubtless some lieutenant or sergeant was doing his work for him, as so often was the case. A clever assistant might even sign his name for him, thus relieving him of any effort. He had put aside his quest of the Boche. His one purpose in life clearly was to follow his mad and unrequited infatuation for Mlle. Belgique.

The story got about the select circle that the major had even carried matters so far as to attempt to frighten off his successful competitor, Sergeant Brunner. Report had it that he had cautioned the sergeant, with a show of authority, that the sergeant was making a fool of himself over the girl; whereupon the sergeant was said to have gone into a rage and walked off without a word of reply. The town major was authority for a story that the bald major had also gone with his car to mademoiselle's home at night and invited her to ride in the military car.

"Somebody ought to tip that old mush off to the fact that he's ridin' to a fall, and a hard fall at that," the M. P. captain grumbled. "He'll go home to his wife and kids with a G. C. M. sentence tacked to his coat tails."

"It's your duty to give him an inkling or two," suggested the town major. "Put a scare into him when he shows up today."

The M. P. captain did so, for the situation was causing him some alarm on his own account.

"I hope, Major, on your own account," he ventured with due deference in his voice for the major's rank, "that you are not followed here some day from your station. It might reflect on me as military police officer."

The major laughed loudly and ordered champagne. "Those dumbbells 'll never find me," he replied lightly. "I'm taking my chances—and besides, none but the brave deserve the fair. Who wouldn't take a few chances for Mademoiselle Belgique!"

He raised his glass and turned toward mademoiselle.

"I'll get you yet you little devil," he bantered her gaily.

He followed this with a playful gesture as if to seize her about the waist.

"Nevair!" she laughed back at him, holding up a restraining hand. "Remember, please you are a polite American gentleman!"

The others were not amused at his sly tactics today. Their faces registered mild disgust.

"Will the old fool never find out that he hasn't a chance," whispered the town major to the M. P. captain.

But the odd part of it all was that the

bald major from Tours did have a chance and he proved it the very next day. Mlle. Belgique suddenly weakened in her constancy and flitted away with the major in broad daylight in his military car; and the major with his arm about her waving a mock farewell to the puzzled group in the door and windows of the Café Côte d'Or. How had he contrived it, he who seemed the least in her favor against that hour when she should tire of the dismal Sergeant Brunner?

The town major, the M. P. captain, the observer-lieutenant and the group of aviators from Colombes-les-Belles were hopelessly mystified. The bald-headed major had resorted to a new coup. He had met mademoiselle as she came to the café. He had bowed and scraped and coaxed earnestly. She had wavered an instant, then stepped into his car with him. As she seated herself she had seemed to change her mind and attempt to rise. The major had promptly put his arm about her waist and drew her back into the seat, laughing back as the car jerked forward and sped away.

"To Bar-le-Duc, driver," they had heard him direct.

"The old fool 'll be picked up by the M. P. bunch at the first crossing and tried for carrying a female in his car," said the M. P. captain.

The others were less concerned with that possibility than with the sudden change of constancy of Mlle. Belgique.

"Ah, they're all alike," growled the town major. "He probably stuck a couple o' hundred francs under her nose and it was too much."

PRIVATE SMITH gave the dire news to Sergeant Brunner that evening as the sergeant was entering the mess hall to which he was attached for rations. Sergeant Brunner became livid, turned on his heel without a word and returned to the radio station supperless. There he paced the floor, suffering dumbly despite his efforts to reassure himself that Yvonne had merely gone for a cooling ride and would return presently. At 10 o'clock he slipped from the station and ran to her house. Surely she must be home by now. No, the ogre at the ramshackle stone hut had not heard from mademoiselle. Perhaps she would return tomorrow, or in good time. The ogre was quite nonchalant and seemed to brighten at learning her ward had left with so important a personage as an American major.

At midnight the now frantic sergeant again went to the hut and awakened the old woman. No, Yvonne was not back. Doubtless she did not intend to return tonight. Madame did not seem concerned. There was no reason that she knew of why Yvonne should return tonight, or tomorrow for that matter, if she did not choose. "*Voilà! Bon nuit m'sieu!*"

Sergeant Brunner returned to his station sick at heart. His bewilderment grew. The old British sergeant's words came back to him. He tortured himself with the thought that perhaps he was a babe in arms, after all. Perhaps women were an even greater mystery to him than he had thought. But why should she give herself to that repulsive major—old enough to be her father. He attempted to carry on his work with the intercept but the aching void of disappointment in love was a new ailment to him and he was powerless for the time to combat its ravages. He even blamed the radio for this tragedy. It had kept him away from her—left her exposed to the wiles of Euzivan. No doubt she had been dazzled by the major's rank—or perhaps he had lured her away with extravagant false promises.

He finally put this wracking jealous whirl at rest with a new and alleviating resolution. Perhaps, after all, it was some terrible mistake. Perhaps Yvonne could explain it all. He would wait until she returned and hear her story before judging her. She had meant too much to him, and he to her, to cast their romance aside lightly. These thoughts gave surcease to his first fevered emotions. Presently he sat down and noted for the first time that the fire had gone out in the little coal heater and that his fingers were dumb with cold. He rekindled the fire and sat dumbly before it.

AN HOUR later he was brought from troubled reverie by a rap at the door. A form pushed firmly in without waiting to be invited. Sergeant Brunner leaped from his seat and stood with open mouth. It was the florid major from Toul, his face redder than ever from the cold, his eyes dancing with a strange quizzical smile.

"You—you thief!" hissed the youth, the

words coming out spontaneously, without effort at restraint.

"Quite on the contrary," replied the major evenly. "I have come to take you to Mademoiselle Belgique—or Yvonne as you choose to call her."

"Come, throw on your overcoat, Sergeant, as it is quite cold outside."

The major walked to the warming stove and rubbed his hands vigorously. There was the smell of liquor about him, but he was quite sober and collected.

"What's the meaning of all this," demanded Brunner, unable to fathom what had brought the major to his station on such an unheard of errand in the dead of night.

"It means I'm your friend," replied the major lightly, but with a touch of mystery in his voice. "I want to take you to your Yvonne. Quick, my lad, before I change my mind."

The youth threw on his overcoat in sudden decision. This weird situation was beyond him—but Yvonne was concerned. He would see the venture through no matter what happened. The major motioned him into the front seat with the driver, climbed in the tonneau, curled up tranquilly on the rear seat and calmly pulled a blanket about him.

"To Bar-le-Duc driver—and make it snappy!" the major ordered, then pulled the blanket over his head as if to sleep out the long ride.

The first flush of sun up had cast a crimson smear across the soggy gray cloud banks that hung high over Bar-le-Duc when the car came to a halt at the curb in front of a pretentious stone courtyard. The major from Toul was out of the car instantly and urged Sergeant Brunner to hurry. The youth climbed out of the car grimly. The thought was torturing him that perhaps this base creature had brought him here to gloat over his conquest. He entered the courtyard with pounding heart. The major looked at his watch, cast a quick glance at the sky and broke into a wobbling, ungainly run. The sergeant was forced to run in order to keep up with him.

AN IRON gate snapped suddenly open before him, a French sentinel brought his long bayoneted rifle to salute, and they passed into an enclosure. Sergeant Brunner's eyes popped suddenly from their sockets and he stood speechless. Across the walled enclosure to which they had been admitted stood Mademoiselle Yvonne. She was covered by a long black garb and her eyes were hidden by a narrow black mask that heightened the deathly pallor of her face. Almost in the instant that he recognized her, there resounded a crash of musketry and Yvonne pitched forward on her face.

Brunner turned, his clenched hands above his head in a tragic posture of mingled frenzy and horror.

"What—what—?" he choked. Words could not find their way through the sudden violent surge of his emotions.

"It simply means," said the bald-headed major from Toul calmly, "it simply means that while this was mostly our own affair yet, as mademoiselle was so fond of saying, we Americans are such perfect gentlemen—too much so to shoot down a lady, and so we had to call in our obliging Allies."

The major lighted a cigaret.

"And while my heart bleeds for you in this cruel lesson, young man," he added pitilessly, "please remember that you are not alone in your sad bereavement. You'll probably recover in due time—but not even military intelligence service has so hardened me that my poor heart fails to bleed for the lady's employer—poor old Bill Hohenzollern. My, how he will grieve over the loss of his very cleverest code lifter!"

Everybody's

Meeting PLACE

Where it is suggested writers, readers and the editors gather for informal discussion

AND still no word from readers! The reason, however, is obvious. We are writing this for the February issue which is just going to press and the first number of the new EVERYBODY'S, the December issue, is going on sale tomorrow. It was in that number that we urged readers to send us their opinions. So, of course, there hasn't been time to hear from you.

You, the readers, will write in all right! Perhaps we, the editor, will wish you hadn't. No, that isn't true! We want you to be perfectly frank.

Modesty or no modesty, we're going to assert blatantly that the new EVERYBODY'S is improving. Surely you'll agree with us that the February issue is far better than the December issue.

With two novels running by such writers as Captain Dingle and Beatrice Grimshaw, we're almost ready to pat ourselves on the back, awkward physically as that gesture may be.

Already, on the first page of this issue we've spread ourselves about Beatrice Grimshaw, and last month we were eloquent, or what we hoped was eloquent, about Captain Dingle. So let's turn our attention to some other writers in this issue.

There's one short story in this number that brightened tremendously an extremely rainy editorial day. Its title is "The Bungalooboohoo Lion"; its author John Dudley Phelps. Mr. Phelps, who is so jovial in his story, becomes serious when he writes of something he loves, and that is the desert.

Seems to me every feature of the great State of California has been advertised and exploited except the desert. I'll have to take back part of that. Somewhere in the Mojave, I came across what had been intended as a town site, but the desert had foreclosed the mortgage.

The desert certainly is a breeding place of stories. There are strange geologic formations and weird tricks of erosion that make settings somebody ought to use. And of atmosphere, there's a-plenty. Also characters are not lacking. Life teems on the desert and there is one sure enough example of the survival of the fittest for only the man or critter or plant that can "fit" the best is able to survive. The natural balance between animal, bird, reptile, insect and plant life is drawn very fine and it does not take much to destroy equilibrium. Then there is chaos for a while in the district affected. This can be appreciated when one considers that all desert life has become adjusted to one peculiar environment.

The desert is a place of great contrasts, contrasts with the outside world and contrasts within itself. At midday, the weather might be broiling hot and at midnight four-blankets cold. Or a fellow might go to sleep in a dry arroyo and wake up on the crest of a wave such as surge in a Caribbean hurricane. The earth and sky colors are vivid and range through every shade and tone imaginable.

Minerals are the lure of men there. Great wealth has come from the desert, greater has been lost and the greatest amount remains perhaps for all time. It is a place of dead cities, dead men, dead hopes, and for each there's a tale, sure enough. But do not get the idea the desert is dead, not by a jugful—it's the livest place *in the universe!*

And another story that we consider remarkable is "Metal Props." It's remarkable, not so much because it is genuine but because, written by a man who has never written short stories before, it is so well constructed and so consistently holds one's interest. But, after all, is that so strange?

Stories, we know, originated around the camp fire of primitive man. There men spoke of their own exploits in their own language and even today there is no finer way of telling stories. Billy Parker is President and General Manager of the G-V Aerial Transportation Company of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, and after he had sent in "Metal Props" we asked him how he came to write it. This is what he answered:

"Metal Props," as you have surmised, is my first attempt at story writing. I have always had a desire to write aviation stories, particularly after reading the work of some of our authors who have used aviation as a background for their stories. Most of these writers have a gift of expression and a smoothness of style that I can perhaps never hope to attain, but in most cases their stories do not ring true to life as regards the flying man and his machines. There are, of course, exceptions, and I have enjoyed many good stories by authors who know and love aviation as I do.

You have asked how I came to write "Metal Props"—and I hardly know how to answer. Perhaps the fact that I myself built a variable pitch propeller during the late war, and had it stolen from me, had something to do with it. Besides that, when I wrote the story, I was on a long cross-country trip that led to Colorado and on into the mountains. I had lots of spare time on my hands—and that sort of trip would just make any one want to write.

From the other side of the ocean came "Snake Bite," by Reginald Campbell, a story that, different as it is from "Metal Props," seems in its way just as genuine. And so it is! Here's Reginald Campbell's history which, like the story, is just as brief and just as interesting.

At the age of seventeen I left school and joined the British Royal Navy as a paymaster. I served in the Navy for seven years, and went through the Gallipoli campaign. After the armistice I, in common with many others, got sick of uniform, and longed for a change in life. I therefore chucked the Navy and got a very good job in the Teak Forests of Northern Siam. There I was a jungle-wallah for close on five years, during which time I had as many as a hundred elephants under my charge. The animals did not live in stables but in the natural jungle. I lived in a tent near them. Two years ago I had to leave the East for good, having had a lot of trouble with dysentery and malaria.

I arrived home (London) in 1924, aged thirty, without particularly good health, without a job, and my only qualifications the Navy and elephants. A queer combination!

I couldn't think *what* to do, and by a sheer process of elimination thought I would try my hand at writing. I read some technical advice on how to write short stories, which naturally teaches one more what *not* to do than what to do, bought a typewriter and bit of carbon paper and foolscap, and weighed in. If I had known the competition I would never have started. But I didn't.

I started on short stories about the jungle. Snakes, and elephants, and tigers, and heroines, and heroes, and villains and brown women all mixed up together. And to my surprise practically all my stories were accepted by the English magazines. And this though I had never written a line in my life till two years ago. Last year I wrote two novels about Siam, which were accepted by the first publisher they were sent to. They did not do frightfully well, since the packers' strike damaged one and the General Strike dished the other. (We have our troubles in old England). But I am carrying on.

Two months ago an author friend advised me to try the U. S. A. with one or two short stories, saying that the editors were most courteous and prompt. Hence my sending the two to Everybody's. I shall tell my friend he was right.

Well, that's all of this for today. And by next month we hope to bring many a reader into this department of informal discussion. Let's hear from you!

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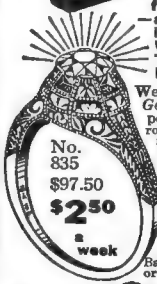

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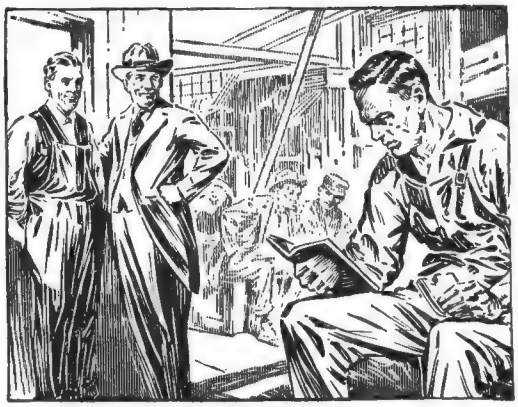

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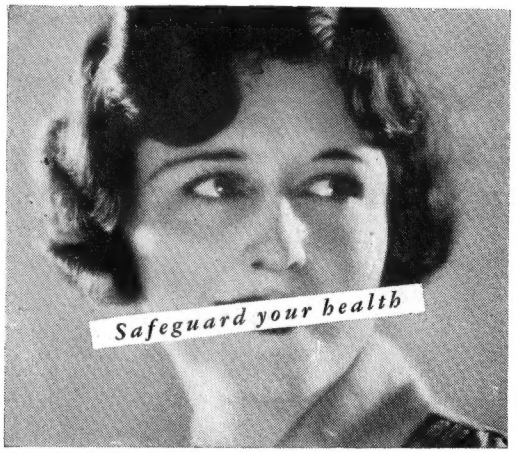

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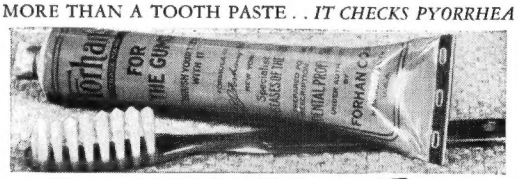

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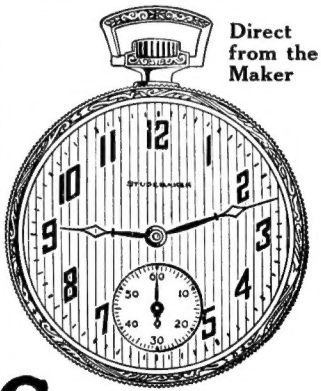

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